

HIP-NOTIC



Bison Hip

John Gilmour Smith and Paul Sloway, guitarist and vocalist respectively with Scottish band, Bison Hip, are huddled in a car, parked up somewhere in their native Glasgow, crouched over a mobile phone on loudspeaker. It's an interview interrupted by occasional loss of signal and intermittent bursts of white noise, which suggests John and Paul are frying eggs on the dashboard.

But we persevere, and guys, forgive me if (Southern softie that I am), I might have, on occasion, lost track of just which sturdy Glaswegian accent was talking at any given time. It's an occupational hazard.

The clues rest in the titles of Bison Hip's second EP *Mid Life Crisis* and the April-released debut album, *Older Stronger Better*: yup, these guys aren't in the first flushes of youth, but as we all know, with experience comes maturity. Gilmour Smith and Sloway, along with bassist Graeme Carswell and drummer, Malcolm Button, have all turned the big 5-0, all with bags of previous form in the musical sense and are of an age when probably the idea of starting a band, particularly during a pandemic, was the last things on anyone's minds. And yet, that's what happened.

Paul: The four of us were talking, I don't know who actually suggested it first, but right away it seemed like a good idea.

John: As soon as we'd had that ridiculous discussion about starting a band - you know, the evening wore on and drink flowed - at the end of the night it seemed like a great idea! The following morning it still seemed like a great idea.

Keyboard-player Steven Radziwonik, the baby of the band clocking in at a youthful 40, joined soon after to complete the line-up. Virtual writing sessions began in late 2020, with demos doing the rounds, but it was late the following year (2021) before band members could get together in the studio to record their first EP, *Dear Greens And Blues*.

Paul: We were sitting on a lot of songs by then. John and I had been writing quite a lot of stuff, so by the time we got to record, we had about thirty songs to choose from.

John: Most of the songs were formed to a certain point and we left a lot of space on the demos so the guys could put their stamp on. And we went in the studio about a month before as well to rehearse and

develop the songs and see how they actually sounded.

Paul: John and I do most of the initial writing but from the moment we all get together, everyone has their part to play.

With the release of *Dear Greens And Blues* in March 2022, Bison Hip were up and running. The EP was reviewed highly favourably in *Blues In Britain* and elsewhere and, on something of a roll, a second EP *Mid Life Crisis* followed a few months later. April this year saw the release of the band's first full-length album *Older Stronger Better*. How do the songs on the album stack up?

Paul: The songs on the album are, with the exception of maybe two or three, all new compositions. It's like anything, you're always blown away by the newest thing you've written. It's the most exciting thing you've ever done! Put it on the album!

John: We've written a lot of material because we've been really motivated to do it. It's been really exciting, we've pretty much written the next record already. It's flowing right now, so we're not going to stop it.

Paul: We've got some momentum going, especially as things are good and getting better. You want to keep it going, keep writing - I mean, John writes songs for fun, he can write thirty songs to my two. I'm a slow-burner!

You both go way back, don't you?

Paul: Yeah, we've known each other for years and worked together over periods of time. We know each other really well and that stands us in good stead. If John writes a song, I feel like I've written it. That's a fantastic asset for the band, I think.

As in any familiar writing partnership, you work to each other's strengths, I guess?

John: Anything I write, I'm always thinking of when Paul's going to be singing it, not when I'm muttering over my guitar. Some of the demos I sent him had me struggling to hit the notes, but I knew that if it was a limitation of mine, it wasn't one of his!

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How do you divide up the musical elements, with the lyric writing etc?

Paul: When John's writing stuff, he writes faster than me and he tends to complete stuff. We kind of have this crossover point and that's when my ideas get pushed over to him, maybe some lyrical suggestions. With this album, it felt quite easy for both of us to write bits of lyrics, we both knew where the stories were coming from.

John: I do have a tendency to write a lot of words, I'm definitely guilty of that. But it's hard to tell a story in half a dozen lines. 'This Old City' (on the album) has the least amount of words in it, but it takes you on a real journey.

There's a certain age-related worldview evident within the lyrics, and also a sense of place inherent in many of Bison Hip's songs, not least in the lyrical references to your hometown -

Paul: We wanted to take our love of blues and rock and mix it up with our experiences of life. Being of an age, we've all been through so many things; ups and downs, some successes and plenty of failures, we wanted all that in the music. And we wanted to wrap it up in the DNA of Glasgow, our hometown.

John: Everyone has that affinity with their home town or city. I mean, to some degree, we've all got it, no matter where we're from. Glasgow evokes a certain feel. I've lived in various different places over the years, and every time I come back to Glasgow, there's a slightly different feel. There's a melancholy feel to Glasgow; I don't know what it is, maybe it's the weather, the football, but it's a comfortable melancholy and that always comes out in the lyrics.

Paul: I think we're at an age now where we've got enough to say and how we're going to say it. We're quite honest. We're happy to be out there and doing this and we give it 150%. Lyrically, it would be ludicrous to be telling people to be rocking till the morning light!

Not much 'Living After Midnight' going on then?

Paul: Yeah, I'll rock you till about the time *Match Of The Day* starts!

John: We don't have the looks to back it up either! (laughs) Seriously, we're all getting a bit older and if your viewpoint between twenty and fifty hasn't changed, then something odd's happened in your life hasn't it?

Paul: And we don't have a back catalogue going back thirty years that we have to pull from either, it's all new material, so the lyrics are current and hopefully relevant.

Another thing that's affected by being a bit older is playing live: gigging and touring. How does that side of things shape up?

Paul: We've some festivals this year coming up, including Cambridge Rock Festival in August. And we'll be looking at more gigs later in the year. Festivals work for us because, generally being at weekends, no-one has to take time off work, or interrupt family stuff. And I guess, with another record out early next year, the plan will be to do a bunch of dates then. But there's a lot to think about. Hiring a van alone is a lot of money these days, especially if you're travelling a distance.

How does the blues figure in Bison Hip's equation?

Paul: We came from a blues rock background. When we were younger, we were drawn to rock but I don't think we realised how much blues we listened to through that. I was naturally drawn to blues singers that played in rock bands, like David Coverdale. I think now we're a little more focussed. We've naturally written songs that fit in with that.

John: I always felt when I was younger that the blues was a lot less to do with guitar chords and more to do with the cathartic nature of the music. When I listened to it, early blues was clearly cathartic. I think that anyone who's pouring their heart out, tends to gravitate towards some kind of blues influence. There was a horrible period in the 90s when rock music was dire and I think that was because it had moved really far from the blues and it lost its soul. We were attracted by the bluesy set up of guitar and organ as well. We always wanted keyboards – I love what piano and particularly organ, add to our sound. Stevie's keys bring an amazing sound to the band, some of the jazzy chords he uses in certain songs are brilliant.

I have to ask, where did the name come from? It's not some terrible euphemism is it?

Paul: The standing joke is that someone is going to need a hip replacement before we go out gigging! The word 'bison' had been knocking around in my head for a while. It was purely a visual thing.

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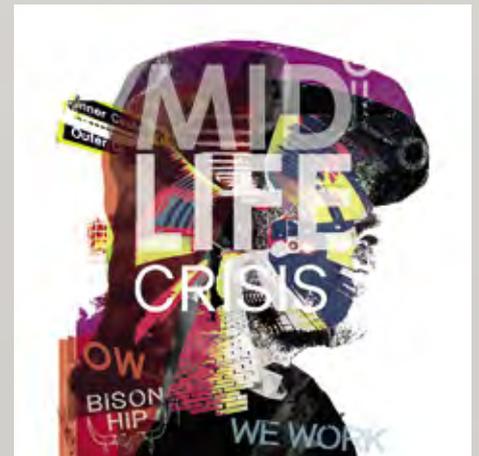
I'm from a design background. Just one of these funny things that clicked and it sounded quite good when you say it.

John: I wasn't that bothered by the name to be honest, early on, but when Paul sent the logo with the horns on it, it made me excited by it. When I saw the logo, it felt right.

So there you go. Bison Hip: top-notch purveyors of classic-sounding blues-rock, with quality to spare and songs to match. Older, stronger, better and undeniably wiser.

Nicholas John
bisonhip.com

Older Stronger Better is out now
on Bad Monkey Records



“We took our love of blues and rock and mixed it with our experiences of life”

