



We Are

# The Village Sleaze Preservation Society

The glamour-trash '80s synth-pop aesthetic of **Soft Cell** was forged in the dark alleys and dank basements of London's one-time sex capital, **Soho**. Now, as developers move in to gentrify London's filthiest village, **Mark Almond** takes **Mark Paytress** on an historical tour of his hamlet of ill repute.

Photograph by **Peter Ashworth**



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HIS IS IT," SAYS MARC ALMOND, NODDING towards a small alley off Rupert Street near the heart of London's most infamous square mile. "Probably the last remaining bit of Soho."

We're standing in Tisbury Court, a narrow 19th-century London back street, drab by day, noirish by night. The telltale exterior of an old-style fleshpot catches his eye. "I sat behind a counter just like that one," he says, peering inside. That was back in 1979, when Almond celebrated his arrival in London with a brief stint as a procurer in a Green Court clip joint.

"I'd promise punters a wonderful time," he explains, "then take them to a place in Walker's Court, where they were sold overpriced imitation champagne by a scantily-clad girl who I'm sure negotiated other business too." He grins widely. "I was a boy from Southport. It was glamorous and thrilling."

Two quick corner-turns later, we're on Brewer Street. Once a notorious neon strip paved with sinful promise, this long narrow thoroughfare now bustles with crowds that wouldn't look out of place along Oxford Street. Shifty eyes no longer seek out ransom note-style calling-cards offering "Personal Services catering to all tastes". It's the high-gloss billboard announcing the latest luxury development that's today's headturner. Almond points up at five first-floor windows near the junction with Wardour Street.

"The first thing I did after Tainted Love was buy that flat," he says. It cost him 50 grand but was worth it for the views alone. To the left, the Raymond Revue Bar, all flashing neon, leg-kicks and showgirls undressing in the windows. To the right, The Coffee Pot, where working girls and tricky boys would trade gossip, drugs and the odd punch.

Even before he'd moved in, Almond had idealised this setting in song, on the achingly bittersweet Say Hello, Wave Goodbye, a slice-of-life paean to a working girl – once a cornerstone of early '80s synth-pop and weird last dances at the student disco – now as timeless as the narrative it represents. "That was Brewer Street in the rain," explains Almond, "outside the pink Piano Bar where the drag artists used to sing, with the neon from the Raymond Revue Bar reflected on the wet street. It was what *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* was about, what Soft Cell were about, what I was about."

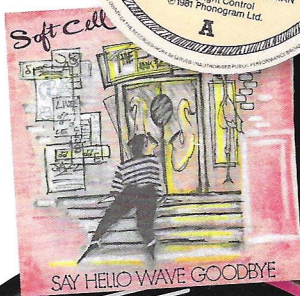
Today, Soho's long and lurid reputation as London's sleaze capital and a haven for the disenchanting and dispossessed has waned. Orange City Of Westminster notices are pasted to the shuttered windows of former sex shops, announcing Soho Estates Limited's application to "transfer the sex establishment licence for these premises". Old sleazy Soho is disappearing fast. The High Street chains are moving in, alongside a swathe of high-end restaurants and executive apartments. The prevailing ambience is generic, the moral code orthodox and metrosexual: it's "monoculture" as Almond dubbed it on Soft Cell's 2002 reunion album, *Cruelty Without Beauty*. "Submit to the great god of Bland." All the kinks have been ironed out.

Marc Almond first came to Soho shortly after completing his Fine Arts BA at Leeds Polytechnic. A return to his aforementioned Merseyside seaside resort hometown was not an option.

"Soho was a spiritual home," he says. "I always wanted to know what went on behind the door, this other life beyond day-to-day mundanity. I also felt you had to be truthful, go to the places you



Introducing: Soft Cell's first London appearance at Richard Strange's Cabaret Futura (note Strange and Shane MacGowan in background); (left) the singles; (below) Marc, the Southport lad.



"Northern soul was what we were about, rough songs about having a good time and having your heart broken."



write about and experience the bad and the good." Elements of what he found there turned out to be unexpectedly familiar.

"Southport is a romantic, wind-swept place with a seamy David Lynchian underbelly," he explains. In the old, decaying fairground where he briefly worked the hook-a-duck, the ghost train's carriages were decorated with "paintings of women with really big cleavages virtually being raped by pirates with exaggerated leering grins."

The town's pleasures were always temporary, the facades always peeling. And once the saucy McGill postcards were packed away for another year, the seaside becomes, he says, "the saddest, bleakest place in the world. The carousels stop, everything is boarded up and it rains. And for the other six months of the year, you're made to feel like you don't live there."

Further up the Lancashire coastline, in Blackpool, Almond's future Soft Cell partner Dave Ball also experienced the peculiarities of a seaside tourist trap upbringing. The idea of never quite belonging had a huge psychological impact on the duo, and left its legacy in more obvious ways.

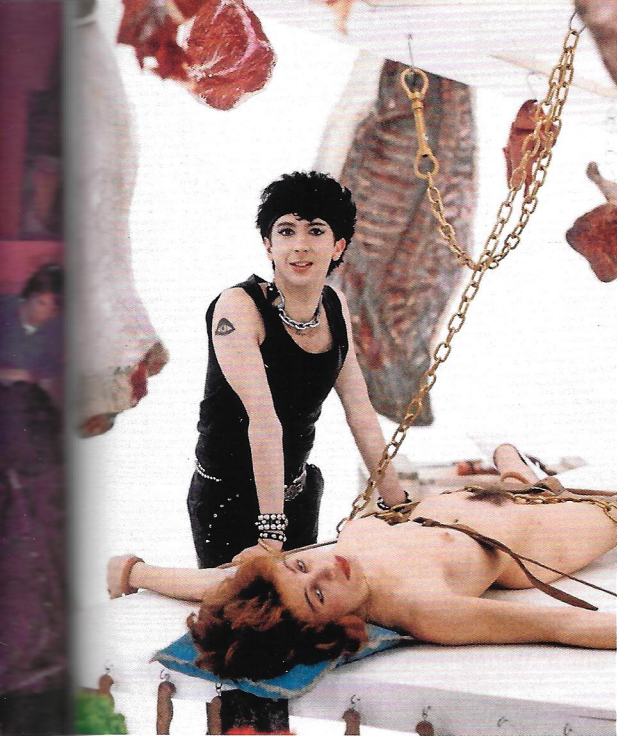
"Dave and I used to say we were like an act you'd see in bars on the promenade," says Almond, "a shifty looking keyboard player and a really bad singer belting out the ballads of the day. We thought that was quite subversive."

From the beginning, subversion lay at the heart of Soft Cell's world. At Leeds Polytechnic, where the pair teamed up in 1978, Almond had been perfecting his life-as-theatre routine, fucking mirrors and smothering himself in cat food in the name of art. Ball spent most of his time in the Poly's recording studio where he sketched out tunes on his chunky old Korg synth. Their first songs were about housewives, supermarkets and consumerism. Debuting in December 1979 at the Leeds Poly Christmas party, augmented by backing tapes and slide projections, their faces painted white, Soft Cell opened with a song called Bleak Is My Favourite Cliché. It was aimed at the po-faced "grey raincoat" contingent, Almond explained later. These post-punk cranks weren't in the business of making friends.

Another early song, Frustration, found the pair already settling into their 'odd couple' roles. "I want to DIE!" yells Almond the

Peter Ashworth (2), Courtesy of Marc Almond, Getty Images, Rex





class misfit, who'd spent a month in a psychiatric unit at 17. "I'm an ordinary bloke," deadpans boffin Ball, repeatedly, until the song squeaks to a close.

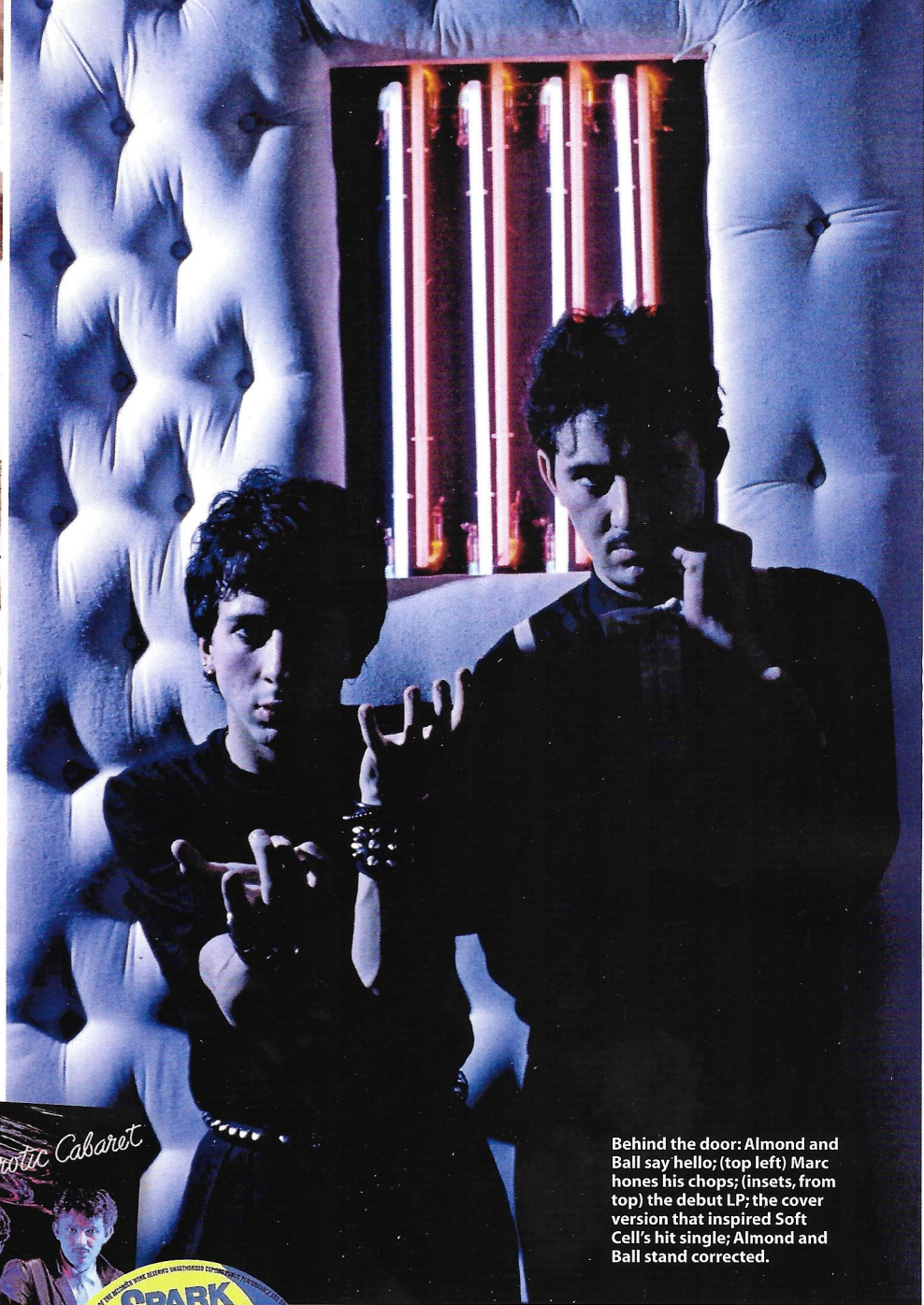
**W**HAT THEY DIDN'T CARE FOR was fitting in. "When we first came to London, Stevo [London's hot young electronic music DJ and, by the end of 1980, Soft Cell's label boss and manager] said, 'You gotta be cool and trendy and New Romantic down here, so dress up a bit.' We were never comfortable with that. We supported Depeche Mode in Rayleigh [Essex] and when we came on the crowd chucked pennies at us. We were the poor northerners who never quite got it right."

Almond loathed the smooth, aspirational New Romantics and quickly made a decision to wear black. It represents purity and drama, he thought, and it had been good enough for Jim Morrison and Juliette Gréco. "We also felt we were more gritty than that," he says. "Not as gritty as Cabaret Voltaire and not as glamorous as The Human League. Somewhere in the middle."

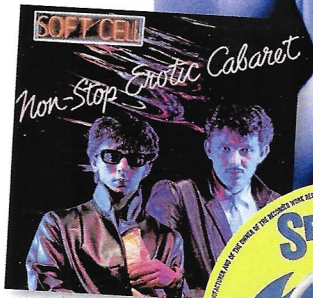
Make that the middle of nowhere. Soft Cell's man-and-a-keyboard lonesome cabaret style had also absorbed a bit of Suicide, the two-man noise machine from New York who were bottled off The Clash's 1978 On Parole tour. Soft Cell's material became an unlikely techno-industrial-pop hybrid, with a mutant assassination of Black Sabbath's Paranoid for a concert closer. Above all, everything seemed ambiguous, a trait they shared with Throbbing Gristle, those scoundrels of the post-punk era. "We liked juxtaposition," says Almond, "the idea of two things fighting each other."

That desire to confound, to make opposites attract, would see Soft Cell transform from the clowns of industrial cabaret to the most unlikely pop sensations of 1981.

"Dave said to me, 'I hate it that electronic bands are meant to be serious and bleak and soulless. Let's do a soul song.'" Almond knew about the Northern soul scene that thrived during the mid-'70s, but



Behind the door: Almond and Ball say hello; (top left) Marc hones his chops; (insets, from top) the debut LP; the cover version that inspired Soft Cell's hit single; Almond and Ball stand corrected.



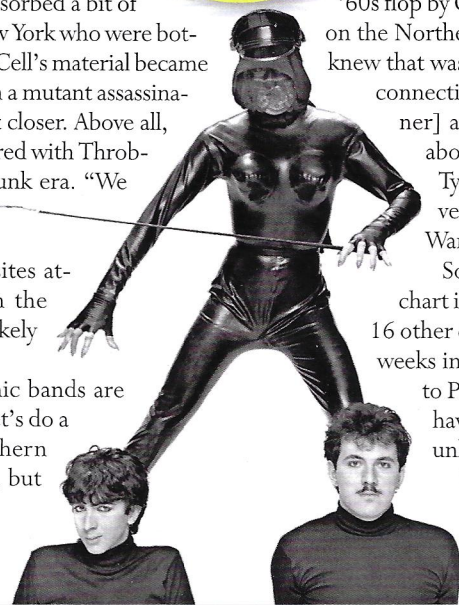
Dave had attended all-nighters and had the rare grooves. The singer's response was instant. "Yes! That's exactly what we're about! These slightly rough songs about having a good time, or your heart broken, set to a dance beat. The sort of things that happen to people before they go off and dance away the tears."

Frankie Valli's The Night was a possibility, as was a mid-'60s flop by Gloria Jones that had been revived a decade later on the Northern scene. "Dave played me Tainted Love and I knew that was the one," says Almond. "There was the Bolan connection [Jones had been the T.Rex frontman's partner] and the song got to the crux of what we were about – love gone bad, the bitter and the sweet."

Typically perverse, Almond and Ball based their version on a 1975 remake by Ruth Swann, aka Warrington-born club singer Diana Foster.

Soft Cell's Tainted Love topped the British singles chart in September 1981, an achievement repeated in 16 other countries. It would spend a record-breaking 43 weeks in the US Top 40. Not bad for a duo only signed to Phonogram because Stevo said the label couldn't have Some Bizzare's Mansfield futurists B-Movie unless they took Soft Cell as well.

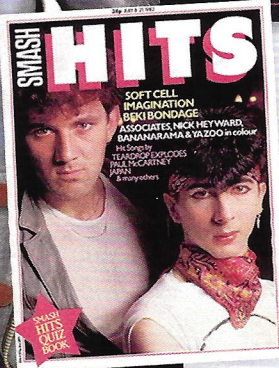
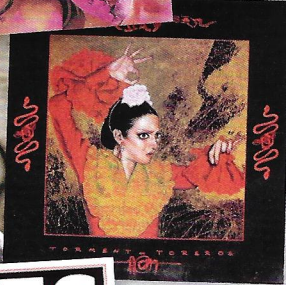
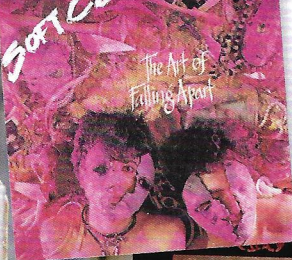
That same month, Almond and Ball were ➤







Wave goodbye: Soft Cell feel the contradictions of pop fame on a *Smash Hits* cover and the *Soul* inside sleeve shoot.



wanted to make pop music. But suddenly finding ourselves being asked to pose in silly hats and party poppers wasn't where we wanted to be. We were an underground band being sucked into a *Smash Hits* world."

Meanwhile, the Soho that had cast a sleazy, seductive glow over *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* was beginning to lose its illicit charm. The singer admits that his Soho had always been as much imaginary as real, half a "Newsreel Soho" world of myth and legend taken from early-'60s black-and-white British cinema, and half an 'Evil Twin' universe, derived from the 1975 TV documentary *Johnny Go Home*, ITV's harrowing exposé of 'Bishop Of Medway'

Roger Gleaves, who preyed on young teen runaways. "That sounds fantastic!" thought the 18-year-old Marc. "You could meet older people who'd give you money..."

But Almond's early-'80s tenure in the seedy London coincided with a Westminster Council porn purge. "Margaret Thatcher was trying to clean it up," says Almond. "Gangs of football supporters would come up every weekend and get very angry that places had been closed down. It became like a war zone, a scary place to live."

The Almond that dared to live dangerously had found a new spiritual home in New York: corpses in Spanish Harlem, members-only S&M scenes in clubs like Mineshaft and The Hellfire Club. Back in the city to record their second album in September 1982, the group were in attack mode. "We knew we had to destroy that pop thing," says Almond. "Maybe it would work out badly and we'd never be heard of again. Maybe it would take us on another direction. Maybe it would break us up. But we had to take the risk. We had to commit commercial suicide."

*The Art Of Falling Apart*, released in January 1983, is to '80s synth-pop what John Lennon's 1970 *Plastic Ono Band* was to the singer-songwriter generation –

unshackled, unapologetic and borderline unhinged, the soapy third-person narratives replaced by dark, down-in-the-basement set-pieces – some of them clearly autobiographical – about the brutality of sex work, mental derangement and no-strings sex.

"Numbers was about somebody looking for anonymous sex based on a John Rechy novel," says Almond. "It wasn't a great radio-friendly idea, but we released it as a single and it alienated a lot of our younger fan base – which we intended." Today, he mildly rues the decision, suggesting that neither Phonogram or Stevo was properly "steering the ship". Truth was, Soft Cell were becoming unmanageable.

Drugs, bloody-mindedness and a melodramatic fatalism all played their part. Almond and Ball's end-of-the-pier routine was fast running out of laughs, too. "We were barely on speaking terms when we did the second album," says Almond, adding that Ball was also experiencing difficulties in his personal life. "In the early days we were very close, staying at the same

cheap hotel, always having dinner together. Now, we only saw each other in the studio. It wasn't that we fell

hastily sent out to New York where Tainted Love producer Mike Thorne had moved. Within hours of touching down, after a flight in first class drinking champagne all the way, Almond received the full Big Apple welcome. "I got mugged by a gang in Times Square, spiked with Quaaludes at Studio 54, and then passed out." He loved it. "All part of the adventure," he says. Feasting on ecstasy (years before it hit Britain), Soft Cell recorded a set of songs – several written back in Leeds – that brought London's Soho sleaze to life as vividly as any 1950s John Deakin photograph.

*Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret* was rush-released that November, its sleeve helping enormously as Peter Ashworth's cover photo saw Soft Cell as neon-lit peep show pervs with something to hide. The contrast of Dave Ball's flimsy, artful synth swells and melody lines, with Almond's raw, fever-pitched emotion – more Donna Summer than Numan or Kraftwerk – brought a heart to electronic music. Best of all were the songs, garishly bright, frank and ultra-vivid with titles – *Bedsitter*, *Entertain Me*, *Seedy Films*, *Secret Life*, *Sex Dwarf* – to match.

*Bedsitter*, *Say Hello*, *Wave Goodbye* and the happy/sad pop genius of *Torch* took Soft Cell's run of hit singles well into 1982. Fame was theirs to lose. "Pop was very seductive," Almond admits. "Dave and I had grown up loving pop music and we



In Marc & The Mambas with *Anni Hogan*; (left) the Dirk Bogarde movie *Victim*.

Peter Ashworth (2); Alamy (2); Getty Images (2)



out. We just lost our connection.”

Soft Cell's short spell in pop's fast lane was hurtling towards its expected climax. "From the beginning I felt it was all gonna go horribly wrong," says Almond. Besides, he'd witnessed public ruination before and it excited him.

"I'd always felt a strong affinity with Marc Bolan," he explains. "He was small and vulnerable and he tapped into another way of life, including sexually, though I didn't recognise it at the time." The more the press ridiculed Bolan as his career dried up, the more young Almond rooted for him. "You knew he was flawed as an artist, and I loved him for that. There is a romance when voices and careers start to crack," he continues. "Because when that happens, a real experience of life comes out. Whether it's the drugs, the drink, the failures or the successes – all these things that made them go up and down start to make them authentic artists. That's why I love latter-day Bolan and Jim Morrison on *L.A. Woman*."

From the beginning, Almond and Ball had nurtured sideline projects, though only the former's – the 1982 double 12-inch set *Untitled* – attracted much attention, most of it disapproving. The budding torch singer sang flat, some claimed. Almond, who preferred to nail a song in one or two takes, countered that it was all "about feel and spontaneity, otherwise it gets too contrived".

The wilful destruction of Soft Cell as a commercial entity both emboldened Almond and pushed him to the edge. Instinctively emotional, close to hysterical, acutely aware he was now "starring in my own B-movie", Almond drew on the gathering clouds of darkness and depression for his next solo project, a sprawling, gothic, flamenco burlesque double album called *Torment And Toreros*.

"It expressed everything I felt emotionally at that time," says Almond. "It was like a nervous breakdown put on record." The drugs, speed and more recently heroin too, didn't help. "I thought I couldn't be creative unless I was snorting something," he admits. "I felt I was being authentic."

Out went the synths and kitchen-sink dramas, in came a small string section and cover versions that suggested Jacques Brel was alive and well and living in Andalucia. It was years before he could listen again to *Torment And Toreros*. Today, in fine shape and drug-free ("I can do more things without that, be creative in different ways," he says), the singer regards it as one of his finest achievements. "That period, from *The Art Of Falling Apart* to *Torment And Toreros*, was a real awakening for me as a musical artist."

It also heralded a significant identity change, the wild theatricality and melodrama of his solo work giving new emphasis to 'the act' while offering some kind of barrier to the frequent questions concerning his sexuality. Almond was gay, but reluctant to let that dominate and restrict his public identity. "Growing up, I admired those artists whose sexuality was blurred," he says. "I loved all the rumour and innuendo, the mystery of the stars..."

## The Village People

Marc Almond salutes five heroes of Soho's square mile.

### Sebastian Horsley

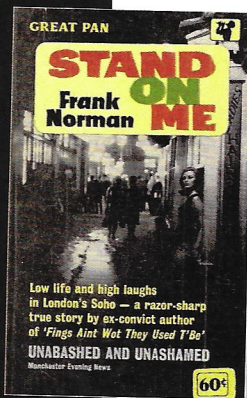


"Sebastian lived and breathed Soho. I'd often bump into him in a Soho bar or cafe and occasionally

I'd visit him at his Meard Street flat. It was the one with the sign on the black door that said 'This Is Not A Brothel'. We'd often discuss our love of Marc Bolan. With Sebastian's passing in June 2010, Old Soho breathed its dying breath."

### Frank Norman

"Frank Norman was a petty criminal who served time in prison where he became a writer. His 1960 book *Stand On Me*, a memoir of his criminal life during the 1950s, is my absolute favourite Soho-related book."



### Molly Parkin



"Molly discovered me. She was the judge of my Fine Art BA final show at Leeds Poly when I performed

Soho-inspired pieces such as 'Glamour in Squalor' and 'Twilights and Lowlives'. I lived with her in 1980 for a while at Keith Richards and Anita Pallenberg's old house in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea. At night, we would go to the Soho clubs and parties. A real Soho Grande Dame."

### Paul Raymond



"The undisputed King of Soho. He was decadent, gaudy, flashy and trashy, a man of opulent glamorous sleaze – all the things Soho should be."

### Francis Bacon



"Soho will always be associated with one of our greatest artists, and no Soho story is complete without mention of him. He flirted with the area's attractive but dangerous lowlife and revelled in its bohemian atmosphere. Film-maker John Maybury captures all this brilliantly in his 1998 film, *Love Is The Devil*."

THIS INSPIRATION WAS DIRK BOGARDE, star of *Victim*, the taboo-breaking 1961 film about homosexuality and blackmail that showed Almond another aspect of London's secret ways. "What I loved about Dirk was this old-fashioned sense that he was not a gay person but a homosexual person. You could see by the roles he chose, very subversive parts, that he was saying something about himself through the medium of film."

By 1983, Almond was also learning to express himself through the work of others. "I feel more freedom singing other people's songs," he says. "It's also part of the process of un-narrowing you, making you aware of and open to other people's ideas."

Before fully surrendering to the song, there was one last Soft Cell drama to play out. As 1983 progressed, the torments continued. His pet snake escaped, freaking out his Brewer Street neighbours, while fans constantly rang his doorbell at all hours. Daytimes weren't much better, with strangers bellowing lines from *Tainted Love* into his face. First the spectacular ordinariness of the

Top Of The Pops studio; now Soho, that nexus of dreams and desires, had lost its lustre. Marc found refuge with new mates Jim Thirlwell, alias sound art terrorist Foe-tus, and [oc]cult post-industrialists Psychic TV, whose apocalypse culture theories (with nods to de Sade and Pasolini) were inscribed in the very title of the third and final Soft Cell album.

"There was a real 'fuck you' ethos to *This Last Night In Sodom*," says Almond. Recorded in mono ("to be belligerent and because we loved Phil Spector"), it was as brutal and oppressive as the most punishing Soho sex dungeon, its brick wall of

sound augmented by pagan thuds and lyrics that testified to Marc's recent brush with psychosis. The first single was *Soul Inside*, part air-punching hi-NRG, part over-the-edge mental collapse. "I fell to pieces," says Almond today. His mid-song "waving goodbye to control of my mind" confession probably explains why he'd taken to sending bags of raw liver to unkind critics and "dipping his finger in the till", his euphemism for sleeping with fans.

Shortly before the album's release, Soft Cell retired hurt. The pursuit of a romantic vision, one that had taken Almond from a sunny hook-a-duck stall in Southport to a gritty, fast-moving Soho underworld, had left him an emotional wreck, "trying to hold on to the soul inside..."

"It's easy to be nostalgic and sentimental about the old Soho," Marc says as we make our way back down Wardour Street, "but my fantasy was something it could never really live up to. Now it's somebody else's fantasy."

However, Almond continues to live in the moment. "My philosophy of life was never about the past or the future," he says, hailing a taxi. "It's all about the ride, how can I make life as interesting as possible, do the things I want to do, interesting places, interesting people. I don't care if it's successful or a failure."

He climbs into the cab. "Success is going from one failure to the next without diminishing enthusiasm!" Oscar Wilde? "I think it's Winston Churchill," he says. Soho may have lost its flair for surprise, but Marc Almond hasn't. **M**

*Marc Almond's Ten Plagues is out now, as is The Dancing Marquis EP, which includes Death Of A Dandy, his tribute to Soho enfant terrible Sebastian Horsley.*