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The House of Love: after the bust-ups they're back

The band were, for an electrifying 18 months in the late 80s, ready to conquer the world. They didn't – but as Guy Chadwick and Terry Bickers recall, on the eve of a reunion, perhaps that was just as well



Michael Hann

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Terry Bickers and Guy Chadwick of the House of Love: 'We fell out so badly.' Photograph: Suzie Gibbons

Guy Chadwick has a dedicated fanbase these days, people who have invested in his current work and been touched by its quality: by the way he takes the past and updates it, creating something lasting, something that incorporates history while being fit for the present.

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"We had our Victorian sash windows replaced with new double-glazed wooden sashes about two years ago," says one admirer of "The Sash Guy" on an internet forum. "Custom-made windows at a fraction of the price the big companies were quoting." Another



**House Of Love
She Paints Words
In Red**
Cherry Red
2013

web group, another testimonial: "Guy has renovated a few sash windows for me and I have no hesitation in recommending him."

Some of those customers probably know about Chadwick's other life, the one he led in the late 80s and early 90s, the one he revived in the middle years of the last decade, and again now. The one where he is the singer and songwriter of the House of Love. "I cannot believe people still recognise me after all these years," he says. "It happens far too much. It used to really embarrass me. I remember going to see a film in the West End and five or six kids surrounding me in the foyer, demanding my autograph, and me being absolutely furious and acting like a right twat. I feel so bad

in retrospect."

What enabled Chadwick to act like a right twat was that at the very end of the 80s, the House of Love were expected to become as big as U2. Their debut album, released on the indie label Creation, made them the heirs to the Smiths, but with the ambition and scope of the Irish band. They had Chadwick's wonderful songs – simultaneously nostalgic and celebratory of youth, and with an undercurrent of sexuality dark enough entice a young audience but not so dark as to scare them off – which leant heavily on the Velvet Underground and the Doors. And they had the extraordinary guitar playing of Terry Bickers, a beautiful dark-haired and dark-eyed boy, stamping all over his effects pedals, teasing Chadwick's melodies into otherworldly shapes, and making the House of Love just about the most exciting live band I've seen in 30 years of going to gigs.

Two shows stand out. The first was in May 1988 at Leeds Irish Centre, playing to a crowd of around 50 in a room that held 800 ("We went to Leicester once and played in front of two people. Literally. There was actually a dog there," Chadwick says, recalling the before-they-didn't-become-famous days). Among them was a previously lukewarm John Peel, reviewing the show for this paper. "The House of Love showed within seconds that they have that inner tension that makes for a great rather than a merely good band," he wrote. "This was one of those rare performances that I wished I could have taken away with me."

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"It was fantastic," Chadwick says. "And the reason it was so good was that he started playing the record on the radio. Things really did change then – he was playing a track every night for weeks." Such was Peel's power in independent music that the House of Love went, almost overnight, from a minor Creation act – viewed by many of their peers as laughably grandiose – to being the hottest rock band in the country.

The second gig, in August 1988, was Creation's *Doing It For the Kids* all-dayer at the Town and Country Club (now the Forum) in north London. This time there were 2,100 fans there on a grimly sweaty day, and though pretty much the entire Creation roster played – Primal Scream were booed off for "going rock", and My Bloody Valentine unveiled *You Made Me Realise*, with its "holocaust" noise section – everyone knew who the real stars were. Despite playing early in the evening, for just 20 perfect, thrilling minutes, the House of Love were already, in the minds of their audience, stars. "We were much more confident then," Chadwick says. "And also, we knew that basically the gig sold out because of us. We were kind of calling the shots with Creation at that time."

Just days later they signed to Phonogram for £400,000 and that was the beginning of the end: they embraced drugs too enthusiastically, saw their relationships strained, lost Bickers, were overtaken by musical events in Manchester, where the Stone Roses and Happy Mondays were breeding a strain of psychedelia that embraced populism rather than classicism. They never achieved the promised stardom, and saw their chance disappear so quickly that Chadwick called a halt to the band in 1993, four years after Bickers left, five after that first album.

"It was great until we signed to Phonogram," Chadwick says, sitting with Bickers in a cafe in a pleasantly genteel part of south London. "And then it just changed. It was pretty much a black line. It was never as much fun and it just got worse and worse and the whole business of making records just went out of the window. It was so sad."

"I felt that for a period of probably a year and half, there was an emphasis that every gig was The Most Important Gig," says Bickers. "I took it to heart and I found that quite draining. I'd been living a lifestyle for a few years where I had no stability at all. I wasn't in a relationship. I was living in a squat. When the major label thing happened, I just withdrew from that." He withdrew so much that in late 1989, he was sacked mid-tour, the day after a show in Treforest in Wales, high on magic mushrooms and burning banknotes in the tour van.

Without Bickers, the House of Love just weren't the same group. "The trouble was that we fell out so badly," Chadwick says. "That made it very difficult to be objective and think straight about it. When we did finally get together again it was really difficult initially, but there was enough of a click to keep at it and keep talking to each other. But it took us a long time to get comfortable with each other in the way you have to be to make music."

Even now, it's an uncomfortable topic for both of them. "We've talked about it more in interviews than among ourselves," Chadwick says. "Doing interviews we talk about things we won't talk about to each other," Bickers adds.

The pair's first reunion – joined by drummer Pete Evans – yielded one album, 2005's

Days Run Away, which disappointed both. "There was an element of: Is it worth making another one?" Chadwick says. "And it took a long time to build up the steam again and get the confidence to just put the time in to play together and become a better band."

Now there's a new one, *She Paints Words in Red*. There is, as one would expect, some lovely songwriting. But anyone who remembers the few months in 1988 when the House of Love were – trust me on this – just about the best rock band in the world will find themselves willing Bickers to cut loose a little more, to stamp his foot and add the electricity. "If you come and see us live, that will be apparent," he promises.

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You'd need to spend lots more time than I did around Chadwick and Bickers to get to the heart of their relationship. Back in the day, it was often characterised as one of jealousy – Bickers resentful of Chadwick's leadership of the band; Chadwick angered by Bickers's tendency to turn shows into showcases for his own brilliance – but during our interview they are careful around each other. Bickers often looks to his bandmate while he talks, as if seeking confirmation; Chadwick is notably more certain in his answers. If there is still any tension, though, they are old enough to deal with it and Bickers at least is able to joke about their past – when asked how they felt about touring together again in 2005, after what happened last time they shared a bus, there is a long pause before Chadwick answers with a single word: "Fine." It is Bickers who laughs and says his reaction was: "When's it gonna kick off?"

At least nowadays they are able to take pleasure in the music they make, even if there's no prospect of it leading to greater things. "The feeling of working together as a group is... I wouldn't say effortless," Bickers says, "but it's a nice way to pass the time. Almost every show, people come along for whom it's an important event."

Chadwick says: "Years ago, when the group split up, I was in a real state and I didn't think I'd see another penny from it, and I thought I'd be completely forgotten. And here I am 20 years later, with another album, and we're playing gigs. It's really special."

She Paints Words in Red is out via *Cherry Red* on 1 April. *The House of Love* tour from 5 April

- This article was amended on 25 March to remove a reference to the House of Love signing to Phonogram in order for Guy Chadwick to buy a house. The Observer has been assured that was not the reason for the group choosing Phonogram.

The House of Love backstory

May 1987 The first single

Shine On becomes the band's debut. Creation boss Alan McGee tells them: "I have just signed the best band in the world." The House of Love are delighted. They are less delighted when McGee adds: "They're called Blow Up." The critically lauded album *House of Love* is released in June.

August 1988 The major deal

McGee checks into the Waldorf hotel in London for 14 days, where he snorts cocaine and speed and auctions the House of Love. Capitol offer him £200,000 – before realising they actually want a group called House of Freaks, not the House of Love.

November 1989 The bust-up

A by now seriously mentally ill Bickers ruins a Welsh gig by singing Sham 69 songs over the band's set. The next day he is deposited at Severn View services on the M4. His time in the band is over.

January 1990 The first hit

A rerecorded and inferior version of Shine On reaches the top 20 – but only because it has been released in seven formats. The band make their *Top of the Pops* debut, with new boy Simon Walker replacing Bickers on guitar.

June 1993 The coming of the end

The album *Audience with the Mind* scrapes into the top 40 and stays there – for a week. Chadwick finally makes the decision to end the band and succumbs to depression himself. **MH**

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