

Charm offensive

Rodney Edwards
interviews
Kelly Jones

"Kelly Jones will only do two interviews," roared an uptight publicist to the assembled group of press at a recent gig in the south of England. The NME were immediately permitted to proceed, obviously – and strangely, so was I... "Well c'mon on then, hurry up!" barked the PR guru.

And so myself and a crimson headed, skinny jean wearing hipster from the New Musical Express were on our merry way to interview one of the greatest bands of modern times, and all under the watchful eye of an intolerable imbecile with considerably large sunglasses.

As we made our way backstage, the scribbler from the music mag could hardly contain her excitement; "I can't believe I'm going to meet Kelly Jones! This is soooooo amazing!!!" she shrieked. Personally, I couldn't wait for a plate of chips, the Stereophonics are great and all that, but I was beyond famished. And as we entered their dressing room, I expected to find the Welsh lads setting fire to the curtains, removing a tooth from a stage hand with a pneumatic drill or whatever it is bands are supposed to do when they are on tour. Instead, tucked away in their dressing room, the Stereophonics were sitting down in quite a civilised manner; chatting, chortling and eating fruit.

Now, there's no denying that the Stereophonics are the biggest band to grace the valleys of Wales, not even veteran Welsh man Tom Jones has a patch on these fellas. And through a concoction of hard work, strength and passion for mainstream acceptance – Kelly Jones and the boys have reached the top of their game with absolutely no intention of stopping anytime soon.

"This is all I've ever done, and all I ever wanted to do. I've been involved in music since I was about 12, I don't really do anything else. My old man used to sing and I used to follow him around clubs. My upbringing has always been about people being drunk and singing. And I grew up on lots of things; I have two older brothers so I was listening to everything from Neil Young to the Sex Pistols and everything in between; soul music, rock

music, punk music and country music. I still listen to all types of music all the time," explained Kelly.

Formed in 1992, schoolmates Kelly Jones, Richard Jones and Stuart Cable practised their art in performances at the working men's clubs of South Wales, as covers band 'Tragic Love Company'.

Frontman Kelly Jones had aspirations beyond karaoke, though. A budding scriptwriter, his muse was his hometown, sleepy Cwmaman – and it was the village's dark underbelly that inspired the songs that would make up the band's earliest recordings: poignant narratives about the despair and celebration of small-town life. "The story behind every song is individual to itself – Lyrically, I think, it's better for the listener to interpret their own meanings to the music," said Kelly.

The band have been off for a little while and out of the limelight, working on new material and taking a well earned break, but now they are back and they've never been happier. "It's been good getting all the boys back together to make music again. We're having a really good time right now, the band is in a good place and everyone is in good spirits, it's great to be back on the road. Since we've been off a lot of new bands have come out, I thought the Kooks record was great; I got to see them a few times live too which was good. Kings of Leon and the Strokes' new stuff is great. There are lots and lots of great stuff. It's nice to see bands doing well because their album has good music. Before, it was about how you looked or acted that got you success. And it's nice to see bands that have been out for a while, like us, getting a kick up the arse by these new bands. It gives us the incentive to get up and go," he said.

In November 1996, the Stereophonics released their debut single, 'Looks Like Chaplin/More Life In A Tramp's Vest'. Early comparisons likened the band to late-period Manic Street Preachers but there was a quality to Jones' raw, soulful vocals that suggested far more than bandwagon jumping.

Over the next 12 months, a flurry of singles heralded Stereophonics' debut album 'Word Gets Around'. It was an impressive work: 'Local Boy In The Photograph' poignantly dealt with young suicide, while 'Traffic' found Kelly Jones' sharp observational eye roving over the minutiae of day-to-day life. It was the band's intense work ethic that truly broke them: 1997 saw the band play over

100 live dates, rocketing the album into the Top 10. The year was capped with a Brit award for Best New Band.

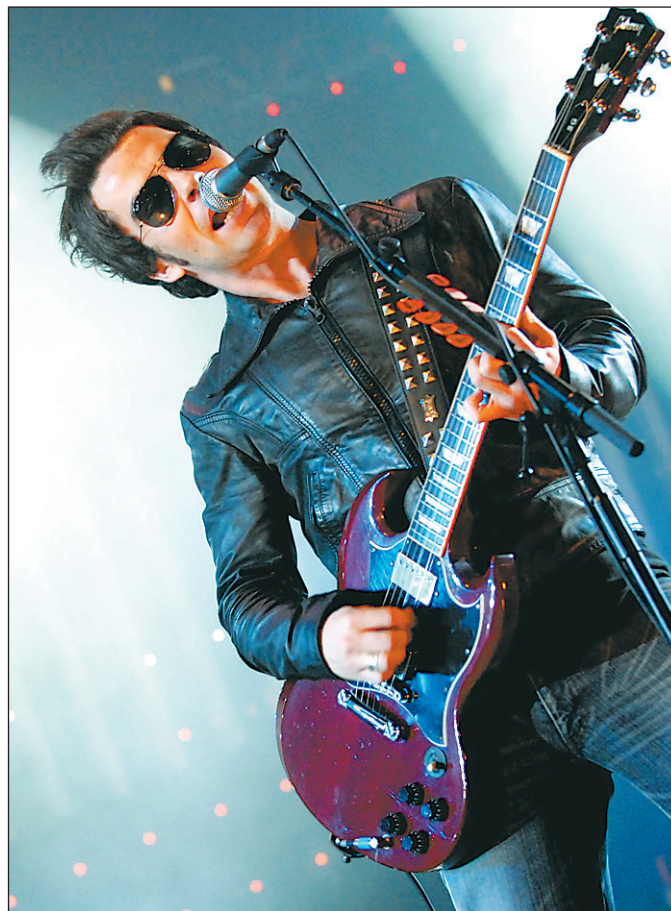
"We had a good couple of years back then. All of the sudden a lot of people started paying us compliments or was asking us to do things, which is the best compliment you can have. It's much better or more important to a musician or an artist to get your comments of people in the business rather than from a great review or a bad review, because they're the reason you got into it in the first place. Some of our highs have been meeting all our heroes and touring with them – Wembley stadium with Aerosmith, Madison Square Gardens with U2, Earls Court with The Who. As far as the lows, they are just something you've got to take with the highs," he said.

If the humble tales of 'Word Gets Around' made Stereophonics the toast of Wales, 1999's 'Performance And Cocktails' would make them household names. The album's first single, 'The Bartender And The Thief' charted impressively, hitting number three in the UK chart. And while the album itself was an inferior follow-up to 'Word Gets Around', it was a greater commercial success.

Exhausted, the band took a much-deserved rest throughout 2000, although 'Mama Told Me Not To Come' – which found Kelly manfully trying to outbellow Tom Jones on the Welsh renaissance man's cover of the Randy Newman original – hit number four in March.

Their impressive cover of 'Handbags And Gladrag's' – written by former Manfred Mann songwriter Mike D'Abo, and popularised by Rod Stewart in the 1970s, rocketed the Stereophonics back up the charts in the December of 2001, prompting them to re-release the album with the cover as a bonus track.

"Rod liked our cover of that record, which was great. And Ronnie Wood played bass on the original and when we were in L.A. mixing the album he phoned me up and invited me out with him, Rod Stewart and Slash! I'm like "What!?" and that night Rod Stewart said he liked the version of 'Handbags and Gladrag's' but he just wanted to talk more about gigs and Wales' football team, but he's a nice guy actually. That song however came about by accident. It was a song we'd loved, I'd played it at an acoustic gig and everyone went nuts over it and we'd recorded it as a b-side and the record company



The Stereophonics' Kelly Jones.

said they thought they should release it, and it got to number three or something," laughs Kelly.

In January 2002, Stuart Cable dropped out of a Japanese tour citing family reasons, prompting rumours of a split. But they pulled back, and the Kelly Jones-produced fourth album, 'You Gotta Go There To Come Back' was released in June 2003. It was a hard-rocking, whiskey-swilling return to form for the band. But later that year, Stuart Cable was sacked from the band due to commitment issues and only heard of the news once it became public.

"Stuart's stubborn so am I, when it happened we were talking then the press went nuts and we haven't spoken since. My relationship with the press has been up and down, in and out, it's different every time. You go through the game as best you can, sometimes you want to play it, and sometimes you don't. Sometimes you want privacy and sometimes you just want a laugh. We've just been one of these bands who go out and have some craic and don't necessary want to be followed home by a cameraman. I'd rather go in the backdoor than the front door where all the cameramen are," said Kelly.

The band recruited new drummer Javier Weyler to the fold, and scored their first UK number one single in March 2005 with the release of Dakota. It was followed by the band's fourth album, Language. Sex. Violence. Other? widely heralded as a musical return to form.

"Like all bands the first two albums are always the ones which are most written about, and the most covered, when a band gets to their third or fourth album, the story of the band has already been

told which basically means that there is less to say resulting in less coverage! To remain relevant though, I think making great records is the key – Press will naturally come and go as it has done with all artists, from David Bowie to Neil Young to U2. We've always been a band which has just concentrated on making great music," he said.

Now in 2007, the band are preparing to release their new album 'Pull The Pin' later this year and plan to play a heap of live dates, including a trip to Northern Ireland.

"The new album is out in October so we're going to do the festivals the following year, and give everyone a chance to hear the new record. We're just going to do Wembley in November and the MEN in Manchester and see what happens. But we are going to go to a bunch of countries in the summer that we've never done before, and tour and tour to get into the spirit before the new album comes out. Basically have a blast and do our stuff in places we've never been, and that has nothing to do with marketing."

And the band will squeeze in a gig at the Odyssey Arena in Belfast on November 27, and are looking forward to it. "The crowd in Northern Ireland have always been the best, it's a top place and we've played there for ten years now. We'll be back there in November because we love it, and we always try to start or end our tours there because it's our favourite place to gig," smiles Kelly.

And with that bit of charm offensive, the interview with the coolest and nicest man in music is over.