



return of the likely lads

NOT EVEN THE RECESSION CAN KEEP THE RIFFFS DOWN.
WORDS WAYNE FLASK

Rayvin Portelli has landed from London less than 24 hours ago. Having barely had time for the luxury of "settling in", he's driving his nth trip to Farmhouse Studios. Usually, he'd be more concerned with memorising the Tube schedule; nevertheless, his knowledge of the country roads on the outskirts of Siggiewi is astounding. I'm supposed to be right up behind him, but find myself wallowing in dark side streets after mistakenly following another car of the same make headed somewhere else.

Very few things have changed since my last visit here in 2005 but the dogs greeting me at the gate are younger, leaner and more enthusiastic, hopping on their hind legs to greet the present tenants and guest. Rayvin patiently shoos them away from the living room.

Ray Mercieca is in equally high spirits as we sit down for a quick run through of the Riffifs' debut album, *Moonstomp*. Halfway through the session his air guitar routine is already well in motion, interrupted only by mouthfuls of crisps.

By the end of it, he's playing another four-score instruments at a go and occasionally hopping off the sofa. Even the usually more composed Rayvin plays a few bars of the impromptu virtual gig.

The music's over. "Had a tough Monday, boy?" Ray asks. By the way, I'm still his "boy".

The history of The Riffifs spans across three decades and two continents. They were very close to hitting it big with their legendary *Dance Music for the Eighties Depression*, a track that shook the foundations of Maltese music in the golden era of the analogue. Their hopes and dreams were cut short when their UK-based record label folded, leaving them with a hit single, a bunch of demos and crumbs from their days of yore.

The Riffifs, in Rayvin's eyes, were way too important to be relegated to the Great Box-room for Forgotten Maltese Bands. The energy that had once brought them to the cusp of greatness would not fizzle out just like that.

"It was meant to be a continuation of what we had started earlier on. I'm not being funny, but it was a calling to me. I mean, who could have ever known that I would come back to Malta after 25 years in the UK and New Zealand to work on an album?"

"When I came back, I felt I had to get in touch with the boys, and say: 'Please, let's give it a try, let's have a rehearsal and see what it's going to sound like.' My original intention was to put all the songs we wrote in the eighties on the album, just for our own satisfaction."

"But as soon as we starting playing, Ray was having his bouts of creativity and we came up with new tracks. We started playing them and they sounded fantastic so, why not? In a way it's nice to look back at what we've done, but hanging on to it too much isn't good either."

Rayvin admitted that the band's first rehearsal after their reunion three years ago was a shaky affair at the outset, even though the members – Cooks and Najju completing the line-up – found their footing. Within a short time, the Riffifs secured themselves a corner of radio with their new singles *Life of Crime*, *Jack the Ripper* and *Monday Morning*.

It wasn't an easy process, in between Rayvin's to-ing and fro-ing between Malta and London and a spell without a rehearsal place. "After the reunion gig at Tattings it took us a year to release *Jack the Ripper*. We only rehearse as a full band and only when we feel there's a reason to," says Ray.

The recording of *Moonstomp* was held over four sessions, the first one in July

last year. The band laid down six songs in their first two-week session, knowing they couldn't afford to waste money by not being prepared for the recording.

"We go in there and sometimes we play live, to capture whatever vibe we want. The first two days are quite intense, then it gets a bit boring because it's listening to the songs all over and adding this or removing that," says Rayvin. "For me and Ray the fun bit is putting the vocals down..."

"We have to somehow keep the live vibe in it, and if you listen carefully it looks like we managed. The good thing is that we have somebody like Howard here who is quite organised and knows what he's doing and keeps us under control."

Rust and motivation were never an issue. "Well we just have fun but I wouldn't say we need any more motivation. Most of the time we just like to have fun without overdoing it. We go through the set, we say: "this sounds good, let's continue tomorrow." When you push too much, and analyse too much, the fun's gone – and that's damaging. And with us, we don't like damage," says Ray, with a smirk. "You have to be motivated to go and spend three

hours rehearsing after a day of work. Cooks (Twanny) works shifts in a factory. There is definitely a degree of motivation. And of course everybody wants to do it – we just enjoy what we're doing."

Ok, so far so good – let's get into a bit of hot water. "Ray, you're almost 50," I begin. "Aren't you guys too old for this whole ska shebang?"

He is predictably incensed. "What the f*** does age have to do with it. That's such an old saying, dude – come on! Shall we put talented musicians in a corner and shoot them or hang them because they age? We don't feel old.

"The point is, we haven't finished what we started and it doesn't matter if we're a hundred years old. We like it and we enjoy ourselves and we'll keep on doing it. It takes a lot of energy on stage – you know what I mean? – to get up and play that music and those songs. You know, the so-called younger people, they have no energy, and they all moooaan. Well, you know, my son is one of them. It's like they're not motivated to do much..."

"We know we're not 18 any more. What we're doing – it's not a matter of how old we are, but we're doing something we've always wanted to do, and that's the album. As long as we can entertain, it's good."

His cocksure grimace surfaces again. "I thought you'd ask that question and I'm glad you did."

They might pretend to be younger than they are, but they definitely don't sound anywhere like 50. Far from a collection of forgotten songs, *Moonstomp* sounds urban but substitutes the tense for the sarcastic, punch and speed accompanied by an omnipresent brass section. It's a tribute to the masters of the genre, the likes of Madness and The Specials, whose ghosts still haunt the corridors of *Moonstomp*. Their album is a rare recognition that, despite all the uphill struggles, having fun is what matters most – even when tackling dur topics. The first single, *Magic of the Sun*, released exclusively with the 8

November issue of *manic!*, is a bright message of hope that shines through the concrete pavements and, ultimately, the mire of modern times.

"As you probably know, *Jack the Ripper* is about Jack the Ripper. *The Killer* is about a guy who lives in his own head," says Ray.

"Well, the album is about killers, mad people, money..." laughs Rayvin, "and then there's *Magic of the Sun*, where we go on holiday to the Caribbean.

"The album sees the funny side of things. There's no moaning in this album. Look around you, there's a lot of serious shit going on right now. We don't want any of that. I like to think we found a remedy for all this stress and it's worked for us.

"Ska music gives you that kind of feeling. You could be talking about subjects such as *The Killer* and it will still get a smile on your face. When ska was huge, it was like: "Hey, Thatcher has five million unemployed? Let's dance to it."

Studio time is up. Howard appears from the doorway already wearing his jacket and a set of keys. We walk outside for a quick cigarette while the close down rituals are performed.

Ray does the talking as he tries to dribble the dogs, who clearly crave our attention. "Look, the music industry is getting too serious, too risible and too repetitive. It's not that we're proposing something completely different, but I can assure you the way we play ska is. I think we drive that pure energy and I think our music smiles a bit."

He thanks me again for asking the "age" question. "Well, you know, boy, we only live once and we felt we had to do it, irrespective."

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