They're all in their Eighties!

The hairlines are receding. The waistlines are expanding. But as the heart-throbs of the Thatcher era go back on tour, it's like stepping into a pop timewarp. By Frances Hubbard

Here I am, surrounded by enough 1980s pin-ups to conjure up a lost world of big hair, bigger shoulder pads and purest pre-X Factor pop. It's like I've been sucked into the centrefold of a vintage copy of Smash Hits magazine. The lanky Ben Volpeliere-Pierrot of Curiosity Killed The Cat is jigging on the spot in one of his silly hats. Rick Never-Gonna-Give-You-Up Astley and Martin Poison-Arrow Fry are comparing their favourite guitar riffs. Paul Wherever-I-Lay-My-Hat Young is smacking his lips over some chilli chicken and two Bananaramas are being primped for the camera.

As if the popularity of TV pastiche Ashes To Ashes hadn't already confirmed it, the Thatcher era has now receded far enough to stop being embarrassing and start being cool again. The unashamedly nostalgic Here And Now Tour, which brings all these artists together again, is further proof of a rehabilitation. Over the past seven years, the tour has become an unexpected phenomenon, regularly selling out venues of up to 20,000 misty-eyed fortysomethings.

"No B-sides!" promises Martin Fry, former lead singer of ABC, from the New Romantic stable of floppy-fringed hunks. Aah, those shiny golden suits. Ooh, those synthesisers. "I'm not someone who says, "I've suffered for my art, and now I'm going to make you suffer by inflicting obscure songs on you." People want the familiar, and why not? They heard us at their wedding receptions and we've been around for so long, we probably provided the backing music to their divorces."

He will be 50 this year. Paul is 52. Keren Woodward and Sara Dallin of Bananarama were both born in 1961. Even Ben and Rick, the babies of the group, are both 42. They are all wearing well, without evidence of any surgical enhancement, but they are still undeniably middle-aged. Ben, despite retaining the frame and nervy presence of a ravenous adolescent, lifts his fake fur Biggles helmet for long enough to reveal that he is bald. Paul, Rick and Martin have solidified somewhat, but still cut a dash in tight Oswald Boateng tailoring. If anything, Keren and Sara look better than they did in their 20s, so why pretend they look the same?

The chat spans such edgy rock 'n' roll subjects as the political situation in Kosovo, the merits of risotto and the BBC's serialisation of Cranford. Martin and Paul, once bitter rivals for top position in the charts, refuse an offer of wine. Rick agrees that 2.30pm is 'a bit early'. Of artistic ego, there is little trace. There are a few diva-ish moments when Keren and Sara balk at wearing retro clothing, but it's hardly stilettoes-through-the-window stuff.

'Ben lifts his fake fur Biggles helmet to reveal that he is bald'

The 'girls' have long had a reputation for being outspoken. The third member of the band, Siobhan Fahey, left in 1988 to be replaced by Jacquie Sullivan. When she left in 1992, Keren and Sara carried on as a duo. They now present a unified, forthright front – especially to make-up artists who are not doing an approved job with their hair. Keren lives in Cornwall with her partner of 20 years, Andrew Ridgeley of Wham, and has a 21-year-old son. Sara is still based in London and has a 16-year-old daughter. It contrasts with their fellow Here And Now performers, who have already made their money and enjoyed the perks of fame, they have a relaxed approach to the tour, which is definitely in the Nice Little Earner rather than the Comeback category.

'It's not as if we actually went away,' Sara rebukes me. 'We're doing stuff all the time, but the pace is…' She looks at Keren. 'Gentler,' she offers. They are working on an album of disco hits to come out at some point during the next 18 months. There is also a mysterious TV project in development. 'A lot of people feel affection for the 1980s because of all the fashion faux pas. It was a less structured age and there was more chance for bands to develop as they went along. It wasn't like we cared if we were a success or not at the beginning, and suddenly it snowballed and it was fantastic. We were treated like queens and were too naive to even realise how lucky we were,' says Keren. 'When you're young, you forget that success is not the natural order. But did we expect to still be doing this? God, no!' adds Sara. 'We won't still be going on stage at 50, but I know I'm going to live to regret making that prediction.'

Martin jokes that he used to think about founding a sanitorium for former chart-toppers, to help them through the years when they stop scoring top 20 hits, and that the tour is a kind of therapy for all involved. 'Back in the days of Top Of The Pops, you didn't speak to other acts because you were jealously guarding your own position and you were too competitive. You didn't celebrate getting to number two because

FROM LEFT Rick Astley, Martin Fry, Sara Dallin, Keren Woodward, Ben Volpeliere-Pierrot and Paul Young

THE WAY THEY WERE

Fresh-faced Rick Astley was number one in 16 countries

ABC's Martin Fry, a former music journalist, in 1987

Bananarama's Keren Woodward, Siobhan Fahey and Sara Dallin

Ben Volpeliere-Pierrot of Curiosity Killed The Cat

Soul sensation turned celebrity foodie Paul Young

you were striving to get to number one. I'm glad I'm not 23 any more and relentlessly travelling the world. It's all much more human and relaxed now.

"It's great, getting older. You go beyond vanity and enjoy things for what they are. I scratch my head about the appeal of nostalgia sometimes, but I'm not going to overanalyse it.' Martin was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma in 1985, from which he has long been in remission, but the experience of the illness has perhaps helped him to accentuate the positive. He clearly loves performing, and is full of quiet enthusiasm for his first new album in 11 years, due out in spring.

Rick Astley, on the other hand, is ambivalent about the business. Singing, yes. The 'machinery of promotion' that goes with it? No. 'Nothing personal,' he says, 'But I can't see the point of interviews.' I'm not offended because he is such good company. He was apprenticed to Stock, Aitken and Waterman at 19, learning on the job while still a tea boy. What did he do after withdrawing from the spotlight in his mid-20s, having scored a number one with his first single? "B***r all. I played golf. I built a recording studio in Fulham. I was lucky in that I made a lot of money quickly and I never did daft things with it. I didn't really like myself at the time and I'd look in the mirror and think, "What are you doing?" My career started with the biggest hit I ever had and it happened when I was 21. I found myself in a bubble, being told what to do, failing to grow up because I wasn't making my own decisions. You'd get this list of places you were supposed to go from the record company and off you'd trot round the world without asking any questions. Around the time my daughter was born, 16 years ago, I had a big gig and I thought, "I don't want to do it any more. I don't want to miss her first steps." I remember being driven to Heathrow to fly to New York and appear on the David Letterman show. And I said to my manager, "I can't go." I got out of the car at the side of the M4.

'I knew then that I was giving up my persona as a pop star, and there are few people who can walk away from pop stardom and recover. I was one of them. I was aware of the implications.' His fear of flying, now much abated, was the ostensible reason for his refusal, but he admits it was as much a fear of fame. Why, then, agree to this tour? 'I'm not sure. I'm going to see how it goes. I like the relationship with the audience, but I don't need it. My last gig was at a friend's wedding and it was as good as performing at Ronnie Scott's. It's the singing that does it for me, not the adoration.'

If Rick is happy to bare all, Ben is a more obviously diffident character. The son of a model and a fashion photographer, he was already well-connected with the likes of George Harrison and Eric Clapton when he formed Curiosity. Back then, they were cool enough to have Andy Warhol direct one of their videos.

A string of chart successes ended in the early 1990s, though Ben has performed live, DJed and written music ever since. A decade ago his drug problems made him seek help in rehab, and he now classes himself as a recovering addict. 'I used to feel a bit hyper when I was younger and I thought, "It's all right, I'll calm down and relax when I'm older," and I have. My approach is different. The gigs used to rush by, but now every moment of being on stage feels good because I appreciate it more,' he says. 'I've developed confidence in my ability. My voice is as good as it's ever been. Better.'

Paul Young won't thank me for the description, but he, together with Martin, is clearly the grand old man of the tour. For years he resisted association with his most successful period in the 1980s, but he seems to have relented. He is, in any case, probably as well-known now as a foodie: he reached the semi-finals of Celebrity MasterChef and acquitted himself honourably on Hell's Kitchen.

Indeed, he is noticeably more animated when extolling the virtues of his ancient coffee maker and various other culinary boys' toys than he is when talking about his greatest hits. His plans to open a restaurant vie with a project to launch a website for unsigned bands. He smiles ruefully. 'It's about time I came to terms with my past. It's not as if I haven't moved on, but it can be a touchy subject if you feel you're being pigeonholed in one era. But eventually you have to back down. For instance, everyone's voice gets lower as they get older, but I refused to believe that I should drop a scale and I'd always perform in the highest key I could, which was a strain on my throat and caused all sorts of problems.'

So is his attitude less macho now? A touch less 1980s, perhaps? 'You could say that.'

Just like their fans, the Hero of Mine's are older, wiser and slightly fatter, but they have mellowed nicely. And how comforting to know that they are not just Born and Bred. ■

The Here And Now Tour begins on 9 May. www.ticketmaster.co.uk; www.seetickets.com

HAIR PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL ANDERSON. HAIR & MAKE UP: PATRICIA O'NEILL USING ESTEE LAUDER AND FRAXA. AND ALICE THEOBOLD USING BOBBI BROWN. STYLING: ANNA CUMMINS. SHOES: ROBERT CLERGERIE. BOOTS, SILVER OXFORDS*, SHIRTS, MARK POWELL AND DONALD EDATENS **GIRLS** KEREN WEARS HEVA WANG @ HARVEY NICHOLS. SHOES BY NICHOLAS KIRKWOOD. CLIFF BY DOWER & HALL. SIANA WEARS SONIA RYKIEL @ THE SHOP AT BLUEBIRD. RING BY STEPHEN WEBSTER. SHOES BY JIMMY CHOO. OTHER PHOTOGRAPHS: REX FEATURES