

Biography

A fixture on the late 1980s UK indie scene; loved by John Peel and in demand from The Wedding Present, Sonic Youth and Half Man Half Biscuit as touring partners, the tragic death of guitarist Rick Aitken in 1989 meant the band never realised its full potential.

Working on the fringe of independent music, based in Manchester and known for their intense, individual style, A Witness were formed by Rick Aitken (guitar) and Vince Hunt (bass, lyrics) in Stockport, near Manchester, Northern England in 1982, expanding to include Keith Curtis (vocals) and Noel Kilbride (guitar) a year later.

Initially a drum machine band, they continued as a three-piece when Noel Kilbride (later of AC Temple) left to study in France. In late 1984 they signed to the upcoming independent label Ron Johnson, and their first release, the 12" single "Loudhailer Songs" (Nov 1984), went straight into the New Musical Express chart where it stayed for several months.

John Peel offered the first of four sessions for his Radio One show - read Vince Hunt's memories of the sessions - and Belgian promoter Alain Bolle arranged the first of their European tours. 1985 was spent touring extensively in the UK, recording a second Peel session and writing their first LP *I Am John's Pancreas* which they began recording in early 1986. Recorded over six months in Leeds it was a move away from the directness of "Loudhailer Songs" to highlight the ability of guitarist Rick Aitken.

The track "Sharpened Sticks" - with snappy bass walking guitar line and insistent, unwavering backbeat was included on the NME's legendary release, the C-86 showcase of the best upcoming bands of that year.

In September 1986 A Witness toured Germany and Holland with labelmates Big Flame and on return released the *I Am John's Pancreas*. That went straight into the NME album charts again with the band supporting big-name American acts like Sonic Youth and Swans on dates across the UK. It was also licensed in Greece.

The independent record market was in recession, Ron Johnson slowly went bust and money was short. John Peel kept the band alive by offering more sessions so former Big Flame bassist Alan Brown was drafted in on drums to replace the drum machine. Keith took advantage of slack periods to play second guitar for the Membranes.

The eight songs written with Alan Brown span the third and fourth A Witness sessions for John Peel, and appear on the *Double Sessions* CD released by Strange Fruit (1989). The sound is lighter, poppier and more melodic. Studio versions of some of the tracks made up the 4-track 12" "One Foot in the Groove" (May 1988.)

"One Foot in the Groove" sold out of its initial 1,000 pressing within days of release, but Ron Johnson could not afford a re-press and it dropped out of the charts quickly. A compilation LP for the USA, *Sacred Cow Heart* - a compilation LP of *Pancreas* and *One Foot* - was released to good reviews, but fell victim to the recession. A planned American tour collapsed and Ron Johnson folded soon after.

After another European tour, Alan Brown left to pursue his solo project *The Great Leap Forward*, replaced by Triss King. The studio session produced some of the band's finest musical moments: the quirky "I Love You Mr Disposable Razors" - considered by many to be their finest moment - and covers of the Lennon/McCartney song "Tomorrow Never Knows" and The Doors' "Break on Through" for two Sixties compilations released by Imaginary Records on *Through the Looking Glass* 1966 and 1967.

The session was notable for the smooth, full sound achieved by producer Chris Nagle, an engineer on Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures*, who captured the easy optimistic feel of "I Love You Mr Disposable Razors". This was to be the A-side of their next single, released in November and supported by a significant tour.

But in early October 1989, two weeks before the tour, tragedy struck. Rick Aitken was killed in an accident while climbing in the Scottish Highlands. The tour, supporting the Wedding Present, was cancelled and production of the single halted. "Disposable Razors" was finally released in late November with a discreet tribute added to Rick, who was thirty three when he died.

Band members subsequently moved onto other projects. Keith Curtis joined *The Membranes* as guitarist. He was later a founder member of *Goldblade*, playing bass. Alan Brown toured *The Great Leap Forward* but with the group's demise moved to Nottingham. Vince Hunt worked on the soundscape project *Pure Sound* before forming *Marshall Smith* with Alan Brown (this time on vocals and guitar) and drummer Daren Garratt.

An 18 track A Witness compilation, *Threaphurst Lane* was released by Overground Records (OVER VPCD 88) in mid 2000.

Line-up 1984-89

Rick Aitken (guitar, slide guitar (died 11 October 1989))

Alan Brown (drums, keyboards, backing vocals)

Keith Curtis (vocals, guitar, harmonica)

Vince Hunt (bass, lyrics)

Triss King (drums)

Christine Hunt (clarinet, violin)

Andy Tillison (piano)