

IMMORTAL BELOVED

Time has shed fresh light on dark times for Concrete Blonde, writes **Sally Browne**

CONCRETE Blonde can easily explain this generation's current fascination with vampires – they've never gone away.

"Twenty years ago, the gothically tinged band from Los Angeles released their album *Bloodletting*, the title track of which is also known as "the vampire song".

"When have they never been around, my dear?" says singer Johnette Napolitano.

"They've never gone away. Vampires are always there for you," she laughs.

"We love our monsters and we love horror, for many, many reasons, and I'm sure people study that all day and have degrees. But we love monsters, and for the most part, in the end, they lose, and I think psychologically we need our monsters because they represent things to us that we can't conquer and want to conquer, and almost always do."

Bloodletting was a seminal hit for the band, who had slogged it out for many years on the live circuit. It contained the famous hit *Joey*, as well as guest performances by Peter Buck of REM and Andy Prieboy of Wall of Voodoo.

The album is also memorable because the band received their first gold record for it – from Australia, no less.

"We got our first gold record for *Bloodletting*. We had no idea *Joey* meant kangaroo," recalls Johnette.

"We got our gold record from (Mushroom Records boss) Mr (Michael) Gudinski on a boat Sydney Harbour and it was truly a memory of a lifetime."

The band went on to have other hit records including *Walking in London* and *Mexican Moon*.

And Johnette has continued her Australian connection, composing a song for the Heath Ledger, Abbie Cornish film *Candy*, and scoring the

soundtrack of Australian film *West*, directed by Daniel Krig, with whom she may be working again soon.

Today Johnette lives in Joshua Tree, California, the high desert, made famous by U2's 1987 album cover. Her home is on a 2ha property where her neighbours are rattlesnakes and roadrunners.

Closely in touch with her environment, she's planning to leave the property she lives on to the Mojave Desert preservation body.

"We won a successful fight against LA dumping trash at the edge of a national park, which is a delicate ecosystem. People don't see that it's the same way people don't see the forest for the trees, literally. You know, (they say) 'There's a bunch of trees standing here, we could cut 'em all down.'

I wasn't a happy kid.
There were a lot of problems at home

While never quite being considered a "goth" band, Concrete Blonde's dark, seductive rock has always been inspired by the dark side. So what attracted Johnette to that side of life?

"My life was dark, it was not a problem," she laughs.

"Things weren't that happy. I wasn't a happy kid. There were a lot of problems at home and it took a lot of time to process. It took 45 years to process, and ... this is why art is important – I didn't kill anybody, I didn't hurt anyone as many times as I wanted to."

"I turned an energy that could have been very bad and very destructive, I turned it into music, and that is why

music is important to kids and to youth. We had that when I was a kid in school. It's been cut now, a lot (from the curriculum). And if it wasn't for music, I don't know if I'd be here, really."

The North American leg of Concrete Blonde's tour has been a success and the band have enjoyed revisiting their best-loved songs from *Caroline* to *Ghost of a Texas Ladies Man* to *Heal It Up* as well as some more obscure ones. The songs don't necessarily conjure old memories, rather sound fresh to the band who wrote them.

"When we were rehearsing before we left for the North American leg of the tour, we were listening to something and Jim (Mankey, guitarist) says, 'Wow, this is actually a good song. I don't remember him ever saying that back in those days!'" says Johnette.

"We'd been together a long time before that record (*Bloodletting*), and we'd been on the road ridiculously, flogged within an inch of our lives, and by the time that record came out it was just amazing that we were still together at that point. It was really tough, you know. So, now I can actually listen back and go, 'These are really great songs, and I'm really enjoying playing them'."

Coming up with the set list was also a breeze because they simply jumped on YouTube to find out which of their songs were most popular. "It was the easiest set list in the world to compile, because we just went, 'Well, what do people want?'" says Johnette.

"It's really a fun set because it's really fun for the audience. We don't have any axe to grind or anything to prove. In those days we were always out to promote a record or flog something and we're not out there to do that this time. "And it was a surprise the tour did as well as it did. It was a big surprise to us and we had a great time. So we're going to definitely rip it up in Australia."

Concrete Blonde perform at The Hi-Fi, October 19; tickets thehifi.com.au or 1300 843 4434.



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Bull takes his pain firmly by the horns

Singer-songwriter Andy Bull remains our best-kept secret, writes Nui Te Koha

ANDY Bull's debut album, *We're Too Young*, made an indelible first impression.

A brave and, at times, surreal soul-pop record, it was one of best albums of last year.

But critical acclaim did not translate to radio support, and singer-songwriter Bull remains our best-kept secret.

That may soon change, however.

After pouring everything into the complex and clever *We're Too Young*, it is Bull's lo-fi, homemade EP, *Phantom Pains*, making breakthroughs.

The rollicking lead single *Black Dog*, featuring Lisa Mitchell, is about depression. The song is based on a discussion Bull had with a former partner when he was at an emotional low.

"I was in a funk," Bull says. "It's a confronting and scary conversation to have, because you don't know how somebody will take it."

"But I didn't want to fetishise depression, or make it seem like a brand or desirable thing to have."

"This is not a case of 'Dig on my pain'. I wanted to say, quite matter-of-factly: 'Man, I am not well. What is this?'"

Elsewhere, the *Phantom Pains* EP features throwback pop and, on the standout cut *My Street*, blue-eyed soul.

Bull says he is excited by writing pop songs again.

"It used to be about songs and songwriting," he says. "Then there was a big push towards textures and loops and being formless. But I think those ideas have been pushed to the zenith and there's an ebb back to the other way, which is songs and structures."

Bull recently discussed his theory with friends in popular bands Deep Sea Theory and Little Red.

"It's a return to how music made you feel as a kid. People playing instruments, singing with real emotion."

Accordingly, Bull is keeping it real –

but simple, too. He now thinks *We're Too Young* was overdone. "My new mindframe is just do it, don't explain it or overanalyse it," he says. "Just do it with the means you have. If it doesn't work, move on."

"Looking for perfection is no longer useful – don't get caught up in the details. Music is about emotion."

Bull worked on *Phantom Pains* with producer Tony Buchen, who oversaw *We're Too Young*.

"We forgot all the old rules. In the past, we'd been very hardline and precise. It was like being in Steely Dan."

Mitchell appears on the EP as a returned favour. Bull played in her band, and sang back-up, at recent Sydney shows.



Meanwhile, Bull is working on new songs, and will channel them into another EP.

"I don't think albums are relevant for an artist in my position," he says. "I want to stay prolific and keep moving."

He has also learned to shrug off online opinion about his freakish voice. Some still think Bull is a female vocalist.

"I have stopped worrying about what other people think," he says.

"I worried – only to find I was held in higher regard than I thought. I wasted a lot of stress on nothing."

Phantom Pains EP (Universal) is out now.



Revision splendid:
Concrete Blonde

CD REVIEWS

DANCE

Rush Hour Beautiful
Various artists
(Ambition)



The year 1999 called and wants its CD back! *Rush Hour Beautiful* captures long-forgotten vibes of the '90s rave scene. Atmospheric sounds of *Orkidea's Beautiful* ambient mix lead the way with a warm-up guaranteed to spark up the most uninspired gym fanatic. With the odd club hit banging through the middle, the album will prove popular to those wanting a balance between workout music and driving in the car.

Jennifer Holmes

JAZZ

Chellowdene
The Vampires
(Earshift)



The Vampires' debut album, *South Coasting*,

was a horn-lover's feast, with Jeremy Rose (alto sax) and Nick Garbett (trumpet) jousting and joining delightfully and guest Shannon Barnett (trombone) adding warmth and depth. Chellowdene has a lighter feel, with Barnett sitting in on only two of nine Rose and Garbett originals. The Vampires' rich horn harmonies are balm for the soul, but let's hear more meat from Barnett's bone.

Roger Mitchell

ROCK

A Thousand Suns
Linkin Park
(Warner)



With their third album, *Minutes to Midnight*, Linkin Park showed they were a band that was prepared to be reinvented. Now the US sextet have shown they're not averse to taking a few risks. *A Thousand Suns* has been dubbed Linkin Park's *Kid A* and, while it's nowhere near the game-changer that the Radiohead masterpiece was, it is nevertheless brimming with ambition.

James Wigney

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