



Label: Tapete Records  
Album cat no: TR317

CD 110672  
4015698001136

LP 110671  
4015698001143

### Tracklisting

1. Before
2. Intact & Smiling
3. In The Light Of  
Fires Burning
4. London's After-Work  
Drinking Culture
5. Small World
6. Thunder In Vienna
7. Deborah Fletcher
8. Control Freak
9. Safety In Numbers
10. This Song
11. Tip Of Your Shoe

## JOHN HOWARD & THE NIGHT MAIL

CD / LP(+CD) / DL // Release Date: August 24<sup>th</sup> 2015



In 1975 CBS released "Kid in a Big World", the debut LP by a golden-voiced young piano man called **John Howard**. But somehow, between glam and pub rock, this early masterpiece fell through the gaps. The world may have been ready for Bowie flirting with androgyny, but not quite ready yet for an out gay pop star.

Forty years on, Canterbury-based/Vienna-born pop writer and musician **Robert Rotifer** enticed this living singer-songwriter legend back to England from his Spanish exile to work on the collaborative project **John Howard & The Night Mail**. Apart from Howard himself on vocals and piano and Rotifer on guitar the band features **Andy Lewis** (Paul Weller's bassist, DJ and Acid Jazz regular) on bass and mellotron and **Ian Button** (Papernut Cambridge, ex-Death in Vegas, ex-Thrashing Doves) on drums.

Apart from the Roddy Frame cover "Small World" ("Great! Brilliant! I'm flattered," says Frame) Lewis, Button and Rotifer are sharing all the writing credits with John Howard.

"Walking tall, intact and smiling / An independent soul, nobody's slave," is how the 62-year-old with the deceptively youthful voice portrays himself on "**Intact & Smiling**", the 60s soul flavoured lead single he co-wrote with Lewis. And as his fingers touch the keys you can sense the electricity of finally playing together with a full band in the studio again after all those years.

It's nothing less than the joyful rebirth of an almost forgotten hero of British pop history.

### *The Making of John Howard & The Night Mail*

It must have been somewhere on a continental motorway in the middle of a tour in 2010 or 11 when Darren Hayman, who played bass in my band Rotifer at the time, asked the question: "You've heard of John Howard, haven't you?"

I hadn't, so I said: "Vaguely, rings a bell..."

Darren slipped a CD-R into the slot, and that's when I first heard "Kid in a Big World", a record now forty years old, full of grandeur, big piano chords and gorgeous melodies telling stories that I couldn't grasp at first, but that somehow felt out of the comfort zone usually inhabited by anything sounding as big as this.

So Darren recounted this story of an out gay piano-playing singer-songwriter who didn't quite make it back in 1975 despite being signed to CBS, recording at Abbey Road and being touted as the next Elton John, because the radio couldn't handle his lyrics about phony family lives, teenage abortion and suicide. Apparently, John Howard was now living somewhere in Spain by the sea with his husband. "Kid in a Big World" had been rediscovered and re-released in 2003 to glowing reviews (which was when Darren saw John play in London), and he had taken up writing songs again, producing records in his home studio that he self-released without any promotion except his own website.

It took me another year or two to find out more, get in touch with John and interview him over the phone for my Austrian radio show. He was so engaging and instantly likeable that we stayed in regular contact. Eventually, our label Gare du Nord invited him over to London to play a show on a bill with Raleigh Long, another of John's fans. A few emails into preparations for the gig I floated the idea of accompanying John on "Don't It Just Hurt", a song from his initially shelved, but since released 1976 "Technicolour Biography" album that I'd recently covered. John loved the idea, so I went one further and suggested a full band. I guessed that my friend and favourite ever drummer Ian Button (of Papernut Cambridge, Rotifer and tons of other bands going back to Death in Vegas in the 90s and Thrashing Doves in the 80s) would be up for it. He certainly was. Then I approached Andy Lewis, obsessive crate-digger, DJ and all-round musician, nowadays best known as the suave bass player in Paul Weller's band. I knew he had been a fan of "Kid in a Big World" long before the album's official rediscovery, so I asked him if he wanted to join, and he immediately said yes.

Ian, Andy and I first met John in late 2013 on the day of our gig. John had sent us a list of songs that we had practised just once, trying to imagine what it would all sound like with piano and vocals.

That afternoon, as soon we got into that small rehearsal studio in Finsbury Park with John everything fell into place as if we'd always played together. At the time we couldn't know that things were going to get to the point of needing a band name, but that's how John Howard & The Night Mail first convened.

The gig itself went so well that John released a recording of it as a live album ("Live at Servant Jazz Quarters"), and we all agreed to make a proper record together soon.

People say stuff like this all the time, of course, but in spring 2014 I walked into a former chapel in Ramsgate that Mike Collins, the drummer from Allo Darlin', and Al Harle, the sound engineer at Ramsgate Music Hall, were converting into a studio called Big Jelly. My eyes fell on a beautiful grand piano and the steps that went up to the upstairs control room, and I immediately had to think of John. This was as close to going back to Abbey Road as we were ever going to get.

I emailed everyone straight away, and we booked four days' studio time for late November.

So now we had a deadline, and all we needed was the songs to record. John came up with a plan: He would send each of us lyrics to set to music and we would send him our lyrics in turn. This set off a transcontinental game of ping pong, lyric sheets and demos flying to and fro, until everyone but John had lost any idea of where we were. But once all the material was assembled (including a tune called "Small World" from Roddy Frame's beautiful 2002 album "Surf" that I'd suggested to cover), John, as ever the perfectionist, routined and recorded all the songs on the piano. To my ears the collection of final demos that he sent us sounded like a cohesive record already.

We had written our lyrics with John in mind, while John, though he always creates fictional characters for his songs, had also given a lot away about himself between the lines. About his youth and discovering the magic of pop ("In the Light of Fires Burning"), his struggles with society's blinkered sexual attitudes ("Safety in Numbers"), his compulsive need for things to be just right ("Control Freak"), and the harsh realities of growing old ("Before"). As for the music, Ian, Andy and I were going to record live takes to John's piano playing, simply doing what we thought was right for the songs, off the cuff and to the point, much like those session hacks had done 40 years earlier on "Kid in a Big World". That was the idea anyway.

So John and his husband Neil came to London, we played our second live gig, a year after our first, on November 26<sup>th</sup> 2014, and the next day travelled up to Big Jelly to start recording. The first track we tried was "Intact & Smiling", Andy's catchy tune to John's defiant lyric. A couple of run-throughs, two or three takes, and it was done. That set the tone for the rest of the session. We'd hit the ground running and never stopped until the whole record was finished three days later in a grand tour de force of John doing all of his vocals in one single day. The morning after I dropped him and Neil off at the airport, and that was it. Nothing was added in the mix.

I'm listening to the record now, and I feel none of the doubts that usually hang around well after one has finished an album, because it was all done in such a breeze, with no time for self-conscience or second-guessing. I know Ian and Andy feel the same.

But most of all we can't wait to see John again and take The Night Mail on the road.

*Robert Rotifer, Canterbury, March 2015*



#### **Promo**

Tapete Records  
Nina Thomsen  
Stahlwiete 10  
22761 Hamburg/Germany

Tel. +49 (0)40-881666-62  
[nina@tapeterecords.de](mailto:nina@tapeterecords.de)

Cover & Press Kit:  
[www.tapeterecords.de](http://www.tapeterecords.de)