

COVER FEATURE

Kings of Creation

Oasis, Primal Scream, The Jesus and Mary Chain... Creation was the launchpad for some of the most vital bands of the past 25 years. Ahead of a documentary revealing the story behind the most important independent record label of our generation, **Malcolm Jack** talks to those who were involved in the sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll



UPSIDE DOWN COST Irish director Danny O'Connor the best part of five years of his life, most of his independent production company's money, his sanity and his health. "I'd never do it again mate," he admits, as the film finally hits cinemas at festivals around the world, "it nearly killed me." But could the definitive rockumentary about Creation Records have been made any other way?

In the process of running a label that was

home to many of the most important bands of the last 25 years – from The Jesus and Mary Chain to My Bloody Valentine, Primal Scream and Oasis – Creation's Glaswegian boss Alan McGee lost his hair, his mind and, after several years of hard partying, almost his life following a drug-induced breakdown in 1994, on the cusp of his company's fortunes hitting their stratospheric peak with the release of Oasis' 20 million-selling second album (*What's the Story*) *Morning Glory*?

It took one "loony" Celt to convince another that he was the right man to capture ▶



CREATION RECORDS

UPSIDE DOWN DOCUMENTARY

Creation's tale on the big screen. O'Connor's pitch was simple – to point a camera at the various artists and other key players involved with the label and let them tell the story themselves. "Anything that we enjoy has to be authentic," he says. "There's no fucking point in sticking up McGee and having a load of library music behind it."

McGee had no financial or editorial involvement in the picture but he lent sufficient support to convince almost every key player connected with the label in its 16-year lifespan to be interviewed. The result is a warts-and-all last word on a record company that set a new and as-yet-unsurpassed standard for success among indies, not to mention a new and as-yet-unsurpassed standard for hedonism.

Overseen by a man who describes himself in the film as a "professional drug addict", Creation was a blur of debauchery. The label's London HQ was a place where entire weekends could be lost to impromptu parties in "the bunker", McGee's basement office, after a new shipment of drugs was couriered over on a Friday.

"The first time I ever took ecstasy was at work," recalls one female member of staff.

The Creation story traces its roots back to the southside of Glasgow, as does O'Connor coincidentally.

"I was in the garden when I was five years old battering a football against my grandparents' wall in Mount Florida," he reminisces.

"That wall backed onto King's Park School where McGee and [Bobby] Gillespie were probably doing the same thing. We have to believe that there are some weird forces at work."

As two young punks, McGee and future Primal Scream frontman Gillespie (a figure whom McGee hails in *Upside Down* as the unsung hero of Creation) used to bunk off school together to rehearse in their bedrooms with their then band. They later both moved to London to pursue their rock star dreams, where McGee started promoting gigs while holding down a day job as a British Rail clerk.

In 1983 McGee formed Creation together with co-bosses Dick Green and Joe Foster. East-

'I was sitting in Alan McGee's jacuzzi with Primal Scream... all off their faces'

DUGLAS T STEWART, *BMX Bandits*



CREATIVE DIRECTIONS

ABOVE: DANNY O'CONNOR (LEFT) WITH ALAN MCGEE; TOP: (L-R) BOO RADLEYS' MARTIN CARR, BOBBY GILLESPIE, NOEL GALLAGHER; BELOW: KEVIN SHIELDS

Kilbride's The Jesus and Mary Chain – after whose debut single *Upside Down* is titled – were the first Creation band to make a mark.

Their raw, amphetamine-fuelled fusion of '60s girl group melodies and wailing feedback didn't sell massively, but it did bring immense critical acclaim and cult cachet for the band and for the label, as did their gigs, which were notorious for riots stage-managed by McGee.

The label would spend several years putting out influential music to little commercial return. The first band to break that pattern was Ride – four teenagers from Oxford who, after being pinched by McGee from beneath the noses of Warners (by the tactic of turning up at every single gig on their UK tour), would bring Creation its first taste of chart success and become labelled among the leaders of the shoegazing movement.

"That was a great time – a realisation of dreams and realising that you're playing a massively significant role within Creation," recalls Ride's former singer and guitarist Mark Gardener, who scored the original music for *Upside Down*. "Up to then Creation were always on the brink of going bankrupt. I mean, you had Kevin [Shields] from My Bloody Valentine,

who spent three years in the studio and nearly caused Alan a nervous breakdown."

My Bloody Valentine's legendary if laboriously-conceived second album *Loveless* finally emerged in November 1991, in an incredible three month purple patch for Creation that also saw the release of Teenage Fanclub's *Bandwagonesque* and Primal Scream's acid house-defining *Screamadelica*.

The label became the first independent to outsell the majors, and the partying hit fever pitch. McGee has described 1993 as his "lost year" in which he remembers little else but discovering Oasis at King Tut's Wah Wah Hut in Glasgow.

"It was like a non-stop Fellini movie," recounts Creation co-boss Foster. "It was fantastic; we loved every second of it."

"We were doing positive things; we were giving talented artists a home. When we had a lot of money, we were giving all kinds of people the chance to do all sorts of things."

"We shared it with people – we didn't just say, 'We've won the pools, goodbye everybody!' That's something that Alan was very big on – sharing the experience with people like us."

Much as it helped, you didn't have to be a boozier or a user to fit into the Creation stable. "It was a time when alternative music was actually for people who were alternative," says Douglas T Stewart, frontman with Glasgow indie-poppers *BMX Bandits* – one of many oddball bands that shared level-pegging at Creation with more commercially successful acts. "I guess Creation became sort of like a home for waifs and strays of all different persuasions," he continues. "At Creation, by not fitting in, by being an outsider, you sort of fitted in. You had Ivor Cutler turning up on his





➔ Was There Then

Jane Graham remembers the first time she saw Oasis... in Glasgow, the city that put the band on the map and where Liam Gallagher returns next week for Beady Eye's debut gig

It was April 1994. I was dragged into their show at Glasgow's Tramway by my boyfriend, who just happened to be the ex-guitarist of 18 Wheeler, the Creation band who had been headlining King Tut's on that fateful night a year earlier when Alan McGee discovered the Gallaghers. We were two of about 15 punters in the room, half of whom were sitting down. But my boyfriend assured me Oasis were something special, that Noel was probably a genius, and I'd be glad I went.

As soon as Liam walked onstage and surveyed the half-interested, lolling crowd as if they were his minions and he was the king of the world, I fell in love. He was wearing a dangerously flammable white tracksuit top and trainers, but still I fell in love. When that rich, rolling, guttural rasp came out for the first song, 'Rock'n'Roll Star', everyone stood up.

Two weeks later I bought their first single, 'Supersonic', the day it was released. I saw them again at the small riverside Cathouse venue a few weeks later, where I got to meet Noel and Liam. We talked about how there was already a feeling of craziness in the air. Liam was particularly excitable, as well as warm, funny and pathologically passionate. He told me he loved playing Glasgow, he felt a special intensity there.

By the time they played T in the Park in July the buzz around the band was so huge they nearly caused a riot by playing inside a tent which the entire T crowd couldn't squeeze into. That show is still probably my favourite gig of all time.

Faced with a sea of screaming hysteria when he came on, Liam calmly walked to the front of the stage, placed his hands behind his back and looked around, nodding his head. He knew the moment had arrived and so did we.

The show itself is a blur in my memory. It just felt like being mainlined with amphetamines. Afterwards people helped their friends out of the tent, all jelly legs and streaming tears.

Noel said it was the greatest gig they'd ever done. As for us, at last we could tell our parents – no, we'd never seen The Beatles, but now we didn't have to. ●



bicycle and chatting up the girls in reception. You would have people like me – I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't take any drugs – walking about with my Sesame Street satchel.

"I remember sitting in Alan McGee's jacuzzi with various members of Primal Scream after one of the *Screamadelica* gigs in London. I think every other person was completely off their face.

"I was kind of just sitting there thinking 'oh, what's that young lady doing to that fellow? That's a bit forward!' I think Alan was all for encouraging individuals to be individual."

Bizarrely, BMX Bandits were the first band Oasis opened for on a UK tour, as Liam and Noel hit the road to becoming the kings of Britpop, selling out two nights at Knebworth, defining youth culture for an entire generation and selling 60 million records. Their success is the axis of *Upside Down*.

Oasis were the most spectacular bunch of caners Creation had ever witnessed; as Noel Gallagher puts in the film: "We partied like drug monkeys." But the party was "tinged with sadness" because McGee wasn't there to enjoy it with them. Just as Creation experienced achievements wilder than anyone could have dreamed, ironically McGee was forced to clean up after his breakdown.

With his sobriety came his withdrawal from the label, at the same time as its enormous success inevitably caused the company to lose touch with some of its founding values. Creation was finally wound up and sold to Sony in November 1999. With Creation's demise, so ended 50 years of rock and roll history

believes O'Connor. "Rock and roll started in the '50s, and I think the full stop came in November 1999, quite aptly," he says.

"There is still great music out there right now, but it's not rock and roll."

The label's legacy lives on in the continuing success of its enduring bands – Teenage Fanclub and Primal Scream included – and the sounds of a raft of new artists, from Glasvegas to Yuck, St Deluxe, The Pains of Being Pure at Heart and Ringo Deathstarr to name just a few. And also in that certain attitude, or "swagger" as O'Connor puts it, that Creation has given to the world – a "swagger" that made it capable of taking the game to the majors and winning.

Upside Down might never have happened, such was the immense cost of securing the rights to use Creation bands' music – now largely in the hands of major labels.

But O'Connor found ways of beating the system. For instance, he cut a special rights deal with Noel Gallagher to use Oasis songs such as 'Wonderwall' for the same price as,

say, 'Serious Drugs' by BMX Bandits (which O'Connor credits to "an inherent down-to-earth Celtic decency" at the heart of Creation).

"As a small independent production outfit, to actually engage with these goliaths – Sony, EMI Publishing and so on – is not something you would necessarily sign-up for," O'Connor reflects. "But McGee did it. And that's why me and him get on – because he knows I've taken it to the man and won just like he did." ●

***Upside Down: The Creation Records Story* is out on DVD in May. Special Glasgow Film Festival screening at GFT on Tuesday, February 21**

