

What's the story?

A new film charts the rise of Creation, the defining indie label of the 1980s and 1990s. It's the perfect record of an era

John Robb Published: 24 April 2011

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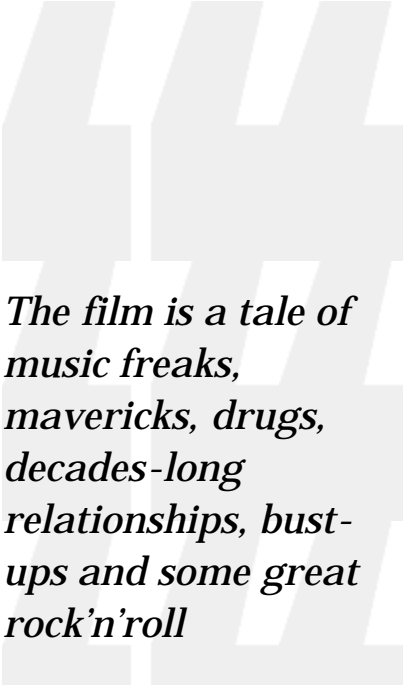
Alan McGee, centre, and rival record boss Andy Ross with Tony Blair (Kieran Doherty)

One of the most rock'n'roll films ever made, *Upside Down*, the documentary about Creation Records, is a wild trip remembered. Alan McGee, Bobby Gillespie, Noel Gallagher and Kevin Shields, among many others, capture the madness of what was the key label in Britain of its time. It's a very human story told with an abrasive honesty, with great interviews by its director, Danny O'Connor.

Creation was one of the pillars of the alternative scene in the 1980s and 1990s. It was also the most successful independent label, peaking with the extraordinary rise of Oasis. The film is a tale of music freaks, mavericks, drugs, decades-long relationships, bust-ups and some great rock'n'roll. The label's boss, McGee, was the firebrand spirit who signed bands on instinct, risking bankruptcy. Despite this, Creation had an astonishing run of artistically and commercially successful acts, breaking through with the Jesus and Mary Chain in 1985 and continuing with Primal Scream, the House of Love, My Bloody Valentine, Ride and Teenage Fanclub, before signing Oasis in 1993.

For McGee, the formula was simple: "It was always about the merging of punk and psychedelia, and when I signed stuff, it was purely instinctive." Now partially retired, he claims to "hate the music business, but still love

music”, and DJs occasionally when he’s not studying the occultist Aleister Crowley.



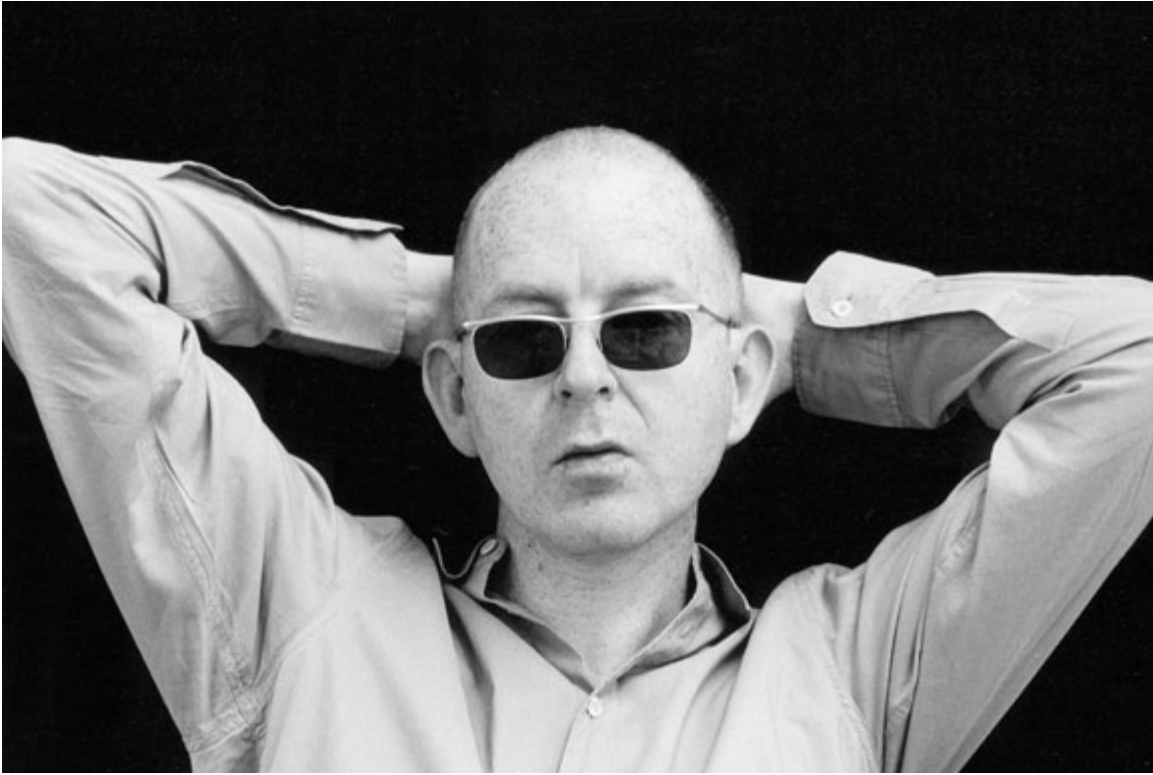
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Creation’s marriage of 1970s noise and confusion and 1960s pop art started off in a Tottenham bedsit in 1983 and ended up filling stadiums, but it’s the core relationships between several Glasgow music nuts that are at the heart of *Upside Down* — a film named after the Jesus and Mary Chain’s still astonishing-sounding 1984 debut single. Primal Scream’s Bobby Gillespie explains the musical thinking: “For people like us who grew up with punk, the 1980s music was bad and drab and unsoulful, so we all looked back to the 1960s for inspiration.” It is Gillespie and McGee’s relationship and interviews that are the key to the film. The pair met in their midteens at gigs in Glasgow and were fired by punk. Now 50, McGee lives on the Welsh borders. His conversation is peppered with unprintable anecdotes and he laughs as he recalls the high times at Creation.

“On the Primal Scream *Screamadelica* tour in Glasgow, at the Plaza in 1991, there were 700 people in the audience. The whole club was off their nut and my dad, who was there, said, ‘It’s great in here, son. Everyone is so happy!’ After the gig I went into the dressing room and it was bacchanalian. It was debauched. There were women lying on tables with their breasts out having sex among the sandwiches.”

Initially a DIY operation based in McGee’s bedsit, the label took off with the release of that Jesus and Mary Chain debut single. Jim Reid, the former Mary Chain front man, remembers: “McGee put us on in London as a favour to Bobby, who loved our demo. He was going to put us on a compilation album, but when we did the gig he was astounded by our unprofessional attitude. Me and my brother, William, the guitarist, had a massive row at the sound check two minutes after we met McGee. I think he thought we must be deranged. And then, as soon as he saw us play, that was when it all started.”

McGee’s insane enthusiasm was the driving force: “It was really infectious,” Reid says. “Alan made you feel enthusiastic about what you were doing, gave you the self-belief and the drive. You had to, because there was no alternative. We had the band, he had the label and if it did not work we were f***ed.” The band took off and Creation had arrived.



Driving power: Alan McGee played a risky game by signing bands on instinct (Jeremy Young)

gigs were chaotic. We'd be sat there drinking in the dressing room and forget that we were 90 minutes late getting on stage. Alan was getting really into it. He said 'art is terrorism' in the press. He thought it was cool."

McGee's enthusiasm powered the first phase of Creation, before the drugs took over.

"I never thought I would end being the ringmaster, but by 1992 I was in charge of the party," McGee says. "It changed the label. You could split Creation into a few different periods. When we started we wanted to be an underground label. We grew out of that and, by 1988, had signed My Bloody Valentine, Primal Scream and the House of Love. The drugs kicked in during acid house and then, in the middle of that, Ride and Teenage Fanclub blew up. It was a strange old time. I was left to run the madness. I ended up going to the office one day and didn't leave for six months, There was no point in going home. I had no home to go to and the party was always in the office."

The Creation offices in Hackney are the stuff of legend. When you visited, there was total chaos, yet somehow a record label was getting run in the middle it all. Acid house had changed the British attitude to drugs, as McGee explains: "I think, and this is the crux of story, the 1990s were more mental than the 1960s. In the 1960s people got off their heads for spiritual reasons, doing it to understand different dimensions or to see what the afterlife was like. In the 1990s we were getting f***ed up for the sake of it." It was into this madness that Creation somehow signed Oasis

Douglas Hart, the Mary Chain's bass player, recalls: "Us selling lots of records with Creation felt like the triumph of the freak outsider, because that's what we all were. There was no scene around us, there weren't enough of us, and besides, we were all too neurotic to sustain a scene."

"The label was tiny," Reid adds. "It was Alan and a couple of hundred quid. We would be sat in a back bedroom in Tottenham packaging singles ourselves, folding the covers into all those bloody plastic bags. The

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and made them the biggest band in Britain.

Signing to Creation made sense to Noel Gallagher. “I was aware of Alan McGee when I was younger,” he says. “I remember there was a big cardboard cut-out of him in the Eastern Bloc record shop in Manchester in the late 1980s, and I remember him being interviewed on local television by Tony Wilson, when Alan claimed he had moved to Manchester in 1988 because there were better drugs.”

Oasis were gigging around Britain in the early 1990s, and played King Tut’s, in Glasgow, in 1993. “We were on stage for four songs as the doors opened.” Gallagher says. “McGee had missed his train to go back to London. He saw us play and as I came off stage he asked for a demo. At that time we had the demo with the swirly Union Jack thing on the cover. He said he wouldn’t play it in case it was crap. When I got back to Manchester I asked around to find out if he was serious, and someone rang and said McGee was deadly serious about signing us, and I was like, ‘Wow!’”

Oasis signing to Creation was a perfect marriage. But as Oasis took off, the Creation party came to a sudden end with the inevitable breakdown of McGee. “That was at the height of the party,” he remembers, “with Oasis joining, on top of Primal Scream, on top of Sony picking up the label. It was a massive freak-out and on the plane to Los Angeles I broke down. They had to get 17 paramedics when we landed and I was given oxygen. I had to change my lifestyle. It was simple before that: when you are out of your mind, why would you have fear? You are fearless — and then suddenly you are sober and you realise that you have loads to lose. I had to pull back from people like the Primals. Maybe I had lost interest in running a label, but then I had Oasis, and I loved having the biggest group in the world.”

With nothing left to prove, McGee shut down Creation in 1999. *Upside Down* is the perfect document of the label that was more rock’n’roll than any band in Britain.

Upside Down is in selected cinemas from April 29 and on Blu-ray/DVD from May