

STOKES OF GENIUS

This week, the guy who produced The Strokes' early records hits the UK for a speaking tour. Jamie Fullerton gave Gordon Raphael a call to get a taste of the band's glory years

PHOTOS BY COLIN LANE AND GORDON RAPHAEL

The Modern Age

Rough Trade, 2001
 "I had a studio, Transporterraum [in New York]; I'd go out to clubs hustling bands and say, 'Hey, I've got a little studio down the street.' It was on that kind of mission that I saw a gig at Lunar Lounge: a free show with two bands. I thought The Strokes were cool, they had a lot of presence, but they were my second favourite band of the evening. I gave both my business card and said I had a studio two blocks from this club: 'Come by!'"

"Two days later, Albert Hammond Jr called. He said they had to make a demo to get their work in clubs, to go up from the free-admission ones to the next level."

"Albert was this young guy wearing these suits with tennis shoes, and there was Fab Moretti with his Coca-Cola shirts. Four energetic individuals walking into my studio with their equipment and one guy moping in, not very pleased to be there, carrying a case of beer. That was Julian. He'd stare at the ground, looking doomed."

"Julian had incredible talent: he was always trying a million different ideas. He did drink beer through the entire session, but nothing could escape his view. He said: 'We want it to sound like you just took a trip to the future and discovered an old record from the past you never heard before.'"

"They also said they wanted to sound like nothing that's being recorded right now. At that time every producer was knocking themselves out on Pro Tools. So I said, 'OK guys, all go into that little room, pick up your instruments and play just like you play every day. That's something not being done today.'"

"At the end of recording the look on Julian's face was like, 'You know, there were a lot of other ideas that I could have tried that might have been stronger.'"

"I figured they'd press up a few CDs of the demo and go from club to club. Later I bumped into Albert in his little suit with a box under his arm: 'Hey Gordon,



check out the artwork.' He showed me this artwork for 'The Modern Age'. He was going up and down record stores on St Mark's Place asking if they would take copies."

"The next day I saw a guy who was an A&R intern at RCA. I said, 'Hey Dave, come on down to the studio.' The first thing I played him was 'The Modern Age'. He was looking around, not interested. The next song comes on, 'Last Nite'. He said, 'Play me that first song again! Can I take this to my boss?' RCA signed them outside the UK."

"Next thing I know, I read in the *NME* that The Strokes are touring. I got a call from Albert: 'Hey Gordon, check out the *NME*, the demo is record of the week.' Then the headlines are 'Radiohead and Kate Moss seen in the audience watching The Strokes'."

"They came back to New York and played a residency at the Mercury Lounge. In his boozey way Julian looks at me, hugging me, and says, 'Gordon, aren't you happy as hell that we're doing so well right now? Don't you wish like hell you'd made a contract with us? You're not getting anything from these records we're selling.'"

"It's true, I didn't make them sign anything. I said, 'You fucking asshole, get out of here.'"



The Strokes in the UK after performing 'Last Nite' at the Brit Awards, 2002

Is This It

Rough Trade, 2001
 "After the Mercury Lounge residency, I went to dinner with Julian at the 7A restaurant. He told me, 'We know we're doing quite well with this 'Modern Age' EP, but our label in England, Rough Trade, wants us to do an album and they have a producer they want us to work with: Gil Norton.'"

"Gil Norton had just finished with Foo Fighters. Julian says, 'If you tell me you're a better producer than him, we'll use you for the album.' I said, 'I cannot say I'm a better producer than Gil Norton.' Our food arrived and Julian stood up and said, 'Fuck you, Gordon, because you said you're not a better producer and now I have to go and use Gil Norton.' He left me with two plates of food."

"I got a call a few months later, and it was Julian: 'Hey Gordon, do you still have that basement studio?' Yeah, of course. 'Would you be willing to record our album? Gil recorded a few things and that's not our sound.'"

"Around May, they came to my studio and brought piles of records, I remember Guided by Voices and The Cars. We had a listening session and planned a seven-week recording project."

"I had entered a relapse into my marijuana days, so I was smoking pot all day long, and several of the band members were joining me. Several of the band were drinking beers, but nobody was doing lines of cocaine on the mixing table, no-one was passed out."

"The guy from their American label RCA came into the studio. He asked the band to fire me. We went to Sterling Sound mastering studio and worked with the head of that studio, who joined with the A&R man from RCA and delivered a speech to the band saying that this sound would prove impossible to sell."

"I was asked by the band, 'Would you agree to the A&R man from RCA coming into the studio, sitting next to you and giving you some advice?' It gave me the creeps, but I honoured it."

"The guy said, 'Take that goddamn distortion off Julian's amazing singing voice!' I rolled it back and looked back at Julian, who shook his head: 'No.' When it was back to the sound I'd had, he smiled and said, 'That's the sound.'"

"When we were done, the feeling was that we could have had a little more time. Even two years later, when they were headlining festivals, I'd be in the dressing room and Julian would be in front of the mirror saying, 'I hope we're going to do OK.'"

Room On Fire

Rough Trade, 2003
 "After the success of 'Is This It', I stopped into the band's management office. I saw a whiteboard: 'Monday: meetings with Nigel Godrich.' One of the band said, 'Yeah, we're really big fans of the sound on the Radiohead albums.'"

"Later that year I got a call from their manager: 'Do you want to work on The Strokes' second album?' During the Godrich session Julian went up to him and said, 'I really like your drum sound, but can we work on the hi-hat sound?' And Godrich looked at Julian and said, 'Julian, a hi-hat is a hi-hat.' He was fired at that moment."

"I got to NYC, they set up and said, 'This is the record we're going to make,' and played. They were monstrously gigantic-sounding compared to the band I met two years earlier. But there was a darker mood: from the lyrics I understood that being away from home for almost two years, partying every night, took its toll."

"A singer will usually sing in the live room while I listen. But Julian wanted to sing sat in a chair next to me. If you listen to the emotional tone, that second album sounds like the weight of the world combined with a broken heart."

"Only later on did Julian confide in me that he was going through difficult times and it wasn't related to his band members."

First Impressions Of Earth

Rough Trade, 2006
 "The band hired me to build a recording studio in their practice room. But they had no songs written. They wanted me to be their in-house producer from the demo process."

"Some of the guys were living in different cities, some were married. They're happy to be in the studio, but are they going to put their arms around each other and head across the street for a beer? No, they're going to pack their stuff up, get in their cars and go to their own family."

"But, still, Julian was the leader in that he wrote all the music. He collaborated with JP Bowersock, who they called the 'guru' on the first album. One year into this process, Albert said, 'We met this guy David Kahne, he's working with Sean Lennon, we really like his engineering skills, could he join us and help you?'"

"In walks this guy and he immediately tells me his track record, and Paul McCartney calls him on the phone, and then he kind of puts his elbow out and indicates that I'm to go sit on the couch. I stayed a month before I left."

The future

"I reconnected with the band in June [2014] for their New York shows; that was the first time in six years I'd been with all of them at the same time. Whatever had gone on between them, they were happy, enjoying each others' presence."

"I read in *NME* that there will be a new Strokes album, so I wrote to Julian and said, 'Hello Julian, please put my name in the hat as producer if there's going to be a new Strokes album.' To which he replied, 'I will do that, and I will champion you.'"

NEW YORK CITY PICS

Gordon's previously unseen studio snaps of The Strokes



GR: "Albert said he was gonna grow a beard while we were recording the first album"



Nikolai Fraiture (left) and Fabrizio Moretti "playing chess during a break"



"I was busy recording when this mischief was being done to Nick Valensi!"