

Columbia's Butler Cuts His Songs From Different Fabric On 'People'

■ BY DOUG REECE

LOS ANGELES—For fans and industry observers who have followed the career of former London Suede guitarist Bernard Butler, the title of the artist's solo debut, "People Move On," due from Columbia April 14, delivers a not-so-subtle message.

For even as Butler established himself critically and commercially in the U.K. with several fruitful post-Suede

collaborations, the British press has been none too willing to give up musing about the artist's acrimonious departure from the band during its recording of "Dog Man Star" in 1994.

"It has nothing to do with Suede," says Butler of the title. "It's much more general than that. People move though life gathering good bits and grudges that you can take with you or deal with as different people pass through you. You take what you need from those ex-

periences.

"I just wanted to make the most beautiful possible sounds I could possibly imagine," he adds. "A lot of the mission behind this album was about failure and weakness and the positive that comes through that. How we don't understand and appreciate the good side until we've been through the bad side, and how we have to move on in order to gain from that."

The artist has evolved in other ways, too. Butler, whose focus in Suede was on the guitar and songwriting, shows a surprisingly accomplished vocal style.

"There was a great breadth of emotion that I went for," says Butler. "I didn't want it to sound amateurish. I didn't want people showing me sympathy, saying, 'The guitar sounds great, but, oh, isn't it sweet that he's trying to sing, too.' I wanted people to be equally impressed [with my vocals]."

Butler also launched his producing career, by collaborating with David McAlmont. That pairing, dubbed McAlmont & Butler, yielded a top 10 U.K. radio hit, "Yes." On "People Move On," Butler uses his expertise to summon up a rich, textured atmosphere, which highlights his noted fretwork but also features the artist on piano, organ, and mellotron.

The album's musical spirit is best reflected in the string-filled "Not Alone" and "Stay," the first single, which has already peaked on U.K. radio via Creation Records, to which Butler is signed in the U.K.

Mark Bowen, head of A&R at Creation in London, says that Butler's fledgling solo career has already exceeded the label's hopes, even though the album doesn't come out in the U.K. until April 6. "Since the day he delivered the album, all expectations have been out of the window. I can't speak highly enough of him; he's probably the most talented musician I've ever met."

After leaving Suede, Butler signed his solo deal with Creation in December 1996. "I would never deny that this

was a shot in the dark for us," says Bowen. "Things have moved far quicker than we anticipated, and we're really proud of the record."

"Stay" reached No. 12 on the "official" Chart Information Network chart in January and has sold 60,000 copies, according to Bowen; a second single, "Not Alone," will be released on Monday (16). Butler is playing a series of London gigs in



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March at the Upstairs at the Garage venue in north London, and an appearance on BBC2's live performance show "Later With Jools Holland" is planned for late March.

Stateside, Columbia begins working "Stay" at triple-A and modern rock stations in mid-April. An accompanying video will be serviced early next month.

Butler takes pleasure in knowing that audiences attending his solo U.K. acoustic performances will find much more depth on the album.

"There's an awful lot of elaborate arrangements and detail that came out in the studio," says Butler. "I had started playing a lot of these songs out of the studio on acoustic guitar just for fun, but it wasn't until I went back to the studio that I was able to flesh out all these things that were going on in my head."

Butler, however, has not always been so totally in control of his projects, especially his collaborations. He has worked with Bryan Ferry, Neneh Cherry, and Aimee Mann, the latter pairing having spawned the track "Sugarcoated."

Butler even stepped in for a few informal jam sessions with Verve singer Richard Ashcroft during a time when the band had split up.

Describing his still-amicable relationship with Verve, he says, "Richard was having trouble with [lead guitarist] Nick McCabe, who is one of the great

guitar players, and they hadn't spoken to each other for more than a year. So Richard rang me, and we went through some things. The next week he called Nick and said, 'Listen, mate, I need you.' It turned out great for all of us. We're very like-minded people."

Through these projects and his work with Suede, Butler's profile in the U.K. has remained high. In the February issue of Mojo magazine, the artist was included as one of the top 20 most influential guitarists of the past three decades.

It is Columbia's hope to import some of Butler's homeland cache to the U.S., according to senior director of A&R/marketing James Diener.

"In the States, people are going to get to know Bernard very quickly," he says. "This album is already percolating overseas, and part of our game plan is to use that great setup in Europe to begin spreading the buzz and generating enthusiasm here as we educate people about Bernard."

The label will use U.K. press clippings, fliers, and other marketing tools here and has already secured coverage in several hip music publications.

Indie retail, which has catered to the core London Suede fan base in the past, will also play a pivotal role by distributing cassette singles and other material and orienting customers about Butler's history.

Natalie Waleik, VP of purchasing at the 18-store, Allston, Mass.-based Newbury Comics, is cautiously optimistic, based on unexpectedly strong customer reaction to the "Stay" import single.

"I expect the full-length to do reasonably well," she says. "Suede always had a hardcore following that hasn't really translated into big sales, but has always done well for us."

The artist, who is managed by Gail Colson in London, has not yet scheduled any U.S. appearances.

Assistance in preparing this story was provided by Paul Sexton in London.

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MATTHEWS SHOWS A DARKER SIDE

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er; it's more like a project from beginning to end rather than a collection of songs."

The album, produced once again by Steve Lillywhite, expands upon the rich textures the band is known for with the addition of some special guests, such as Alanis Morissette on "Spoon." The Kronos Quartet appears on "Halloween" and "The Stone," while Béla Fleck plays on "Don't Drink The Water," "The Last Stop," and "Spoon."

"It's outstanding," says Jim Litwak, executive VP of the 540-store, Albany, N.Y.-based Trans World Entertainment retail chain, speaking of the album. "They've continued to evolve; you see it in each album. I think it will do exceptionally well. Their fan base is enormous, and I learned something when they put out 'Red Rocks.' With very little marketing, it was still a big record."

According to SoundScan, "Live At Red Rocks 8.15.95," released in October 1997, has sold more than 619,000 copies, while the band's last full-length studio album, 1996's "Crash," sold more than 3.5 million. 1994's "Under The Table And Dreaming" has sold more than 3.3 million units.

"Almost four years ago, this band was playing in New York City at Wetlands, which holds 200 people," says Hugh Surratt, VP of marketing and artist development at RCA. "By the time we got through the 'Crash' album, they were headlining Madison Square Garden. The ['Crash'] single 'Crash Into Me' opened so many doors. There's a whole broader base that Dave Matthews Band exists in now that we didn't have going into the last album."

However, the band, which includes Carter Beauford (drums, percussion), Stefan Lessard (bass), Leroy Moore (saxophone, flute), and Boyd Tinsley (violin); its management (Red Light Management); and RCA have been cautious about how far the group delves into the mainstream, including top 40 and AC radio and major media exposure.

"We will service all of radio, but we still need to keep the focus on the original core formats of rock, modern rock, and triple-A," says Surratt.

Matthews says he's not frightened of the fact that the group is a big pop band now, but he does try to keep from being overexposed. "I never underestimate pop," he says. "Some of my

favorite people are pop, and people get upset when they ask what kind of music I like and I say pop music. But, that's more accurate than the [Grateful] Dead, which I never really listened to.

"[Pop] doesn't frighten me. If we can still keep ourselves off the covers of magazines, maybe not all of them, it'll be fine. We won't play Denny's or Kmart, and we try not to get on the first 20 pages of Rolling Stone. Every once in a while we pull the reins in a little bit, even if we're just under the impression that we're holding them."

Plans for promoting the album include the band's usual rigorous tour schedule, which will begin May 2 in Montreal, then hit the U.S. May 15 and remain stateside through early June. But first the band will perform at the Victory Stadium in Roanoke, Va., to benefit various local charities.

Surratt says the show will be taped to air on MTV's "Live At The 10 Spot" April 24. After that, the band will play the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival April 26. Once the initial U.S. dates are done, an extensive European tour will begin, and then the band will return to the U.S. once again for more dates.