

The Blue Van – biography (May 2014)

Get on the blue bandwagon – four rock sprouts from Broenderslev, DK

The story of Denmark's The Blue Van takes off in Hallund, a village just outside Broenderslev, where four rock sprouts, all aged 13, met in and around the local music school. They drew lots over the lead singer, with Steffen Westmark coming up the winner, and started playing blues rock.

These village sons --Søren, Steffen, Allan and Per-- rehearsed together in the basement at a grandmother's house. She suffered from poor hearing, so their efforts didn't disrupt her day. They christened themselves The Blue Van, an homage to the vehicles that used to transport patients to the local mental hospital. The quartet developed as a rock 'n' roll orchestra, sprinkled with inspiration from beat music's golden age.

In 2001, the quartet made the leap to Copenhagen, where they recorded and self-funded the *A Session With The Blue Van* EP. The EP was rife with '60s-inspired compositions that also crackled with the band's signature guitar sound and organ pieces. They laid the foundation for their signature sound. At this point, The Blue Van played concerts at Spot Festival and Roskilde Festival, and they surfed atop a retro-rock wave.

The American dream – record deal with the largest indie label

With *A Session With The Blue Van* in their back pockets and the fact that they were getting their live legs underneath them with major gigs, the next step was the "business" side of things. The Blue Van landed a management deal with the Danish indie record company, Iceberg Records, and in the autumn of 2003, the band recorded their debut album, *The Art of Rolling* in Hamburg. The album was recorded *live* with all the instruments in the same studio, marking a return to the classical recording methods of the past, most of which have been lost or forsaken in recent years due to technological advancements. Also, this debut album also carried an understanding of dogmatics, faithfully following the sound and means used on the classic rock 'n' roll albums from 1964-1967.

The band's management was eventually contacted by an A&R at TVT, an American record company, which promptly flew in to see The Blue Van live with little notice. The band had two days to put together a showcase in Copenhagen, which was resonant and powerful enough to convince TVT, which was, at the time, the largest American indie label, to ink them to a record deal.

The opportunity to break wide open in America, before enjoying the same feat in their native Denmark, was imminent. To establish The Blue Van in the U.S. market, the label moved the band to the States in 2005. Five guys from Northern Jutland moved into an apartment in Brooklyn, New York. They proceeded to play shows and tour.

"First we came from Hallund to Copenhagen, which as such was a radical change. Shortly after, we were moved to an apartment in New York, which was weird," says Westmark of the culture shock that came along with the pursuit of the rock 'n' roll dream.

Their time in NYC was marked by hard work, as oppose to glamour. During the first four months in the States, the band embarked on a residency. That is, they played clubs in New York as *residents* and gave multiple concerts in the same venues in order to build up their name. Instead of taking advantage of all that Manhattan had to offer, and possibly getting themselves in trouble, the band retreated to their outer borough digs, drinking bottled beer on the fire escape to pass time on the nights off.

At the same time, *The Art of Rolling* was released back home in Denmark, where they became known as the band who crossed the Atlantic to live the American dream. The Blue Van proved you can go home again, returning to Denmark to play at Roskilde Festival.

The price of independence – on killer tours in the USA

Next up was a second album. "We believed that our fortune was now made," Westmark said. "We were well on our way, heading back to the USA to record album number two. *Dear Independence* was produced by Henry Hirsch, who is Lenny Kravitz's technician and co-producer, and we had a very ambivalent relationship to that album."

That's likely due to the process and how things went down.

The album was recorded with perfectionistic doctrines in a studio on 47th Street in New York. Everything was recorded on analog tapes. The tracks were rehearsed ad nauseam and there was very little regard for the state of the band members at this time. In spite of this, *Dear Independence* turned out to be a whacky, melodic magnum opus for The Blue Van, who could start to see the result of their hard work with the recordings and their slate of 40-50 gigs in Northeast USA.

The Blue Van received tour support from their record company and they enjoyed slots on major U.S. tours, including dates with Hot Hot Heat, The Killers, and The Pretenders. Next was a two-month tour with The Electric Six, crisscrossing the States in an auto camper with five bunks and a trailer.

"It was a killer tour," Westmark recalls, noting the band's rock solid bond as the connective tissue and that which kept them from falling prey to the issues that plague European bands trying to make it in America. "There was nothing to do and at night, we stayed in parking lots in front of supermarkets. The other support band was more or less disintegrated at the time. Luckily, we were good at avoiding conflicts, being the great childhood friends we are."

This tour was an experience and The Blue Van lived and learned. During those years, The Blue Van was the Danish band to play the most foreign shows. They had evolved into a tight, "must see" live band by playing night after night, as often as they could.

The Blue Van were eventually tapped to serve as the support band for Australia's Jet. The Blue Van opened the east coast US leg and 22 European concerts.

Out and home again – TVT goes bankrupt

At the same time, Westmark, along with Soren V. Christensen (keyboards, vocals, guitars), Allan F. Villadsen (bass) and Per Jørgensen (drums), returned to the task of songwriting after completing the necessary tour rounds. The band had played in front of thousands of people in Japan, the USA, Canada, Vietnam, where they were Danish music ambassadors, and all over Europe, performing in Spain, France and Germany. But still The Blue Van, like many upstart bands, struggled to truly break through in large music markets like Germany and North America.

TVT Records did not pick up an option for the third album but that's a moot point, since the label went bankrupt shortly after. The Blue Van returned to Denmark and signed a record deal with Iceberg Records.

"We were proud and really nervous," Westmark said. "The Blue Van was kind of reset with [new

album] *Man Up* and it was a chance to return home. We had spent so much time abroad that automatically we thought that Denmark would follow." But the band was not crestfallen or bitter about the experience. In fact, they sucked the marrow out of it. "I like the naivety in just doing what we did," Westmark reasons. "Going to the USA! We were childhood friends, climbing the tree together. I don't remember a time where we did not play together and it has always been the identity of each of us, being [in] The Blue Van."

The third album *Man Up* was recorded by Dan Hougesen and Mark Wills in Hamburg and Randers, DK, and with the key singles being "Silly Boy" and "Man Up." It was a multi-faceted album with a high-fi feeling, although the basic tracks were still recorded live. It was a rebirth of an experienced studio band that excelled onstage with the raw garage rock hymns.

Despite their American sojourn not working out as planned or as they had hoped, The Blue Van experienced a resurgence in Europe.

The audiences and size of the venues for their next round of live concerts grew in number. At first, The Blue Van embarked on club tours in the larger cities. Then, they embarked on the long festival summer and returned to the outer areas. Ultimately, The Blue Van went even further out into the corners of the country, upping the ante of their production and stages.

Synchronized – The Blue Van writes music for Apple and Soderbergh

American dreams were temporarily put on hold, while The Blue Van were *at home*. Their work was interrupted by short trips to France, Spain, Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Still, the band's manager remained focused on the American market, working diligently on sync deals to place The Blue Van's music on American TV shows and in advertisements. Not only is TV licensing an important source of attention but it was also a revenue stream. The band could make money of these placements without breaking their concentration on writing new material.

The song "Silly Boy" was chosen as the soundtrack for the ad for Samsung's Behold mobile phone in 2008, while "Man Up" was used in the TV series *90210*, which attracted a teen-driven audience, as well as in the popular crime procedural *CSI: New York*.

In 2010, "There Goes My Love" from The Blue Van's fourth album *Love Shot* (2010) was featured in the launch propaganda for the Apple iPad. There was no bigger product launch at the time, and there was The Blue Van, intimately involved. The partnership and the association with the biggest brand in America created incredible exposure for The Blue Van. The placement's weight was immeasurable and priceless, and it was a major gold star on The Blue Van's resume.

"Love Shot" was featured in the critically and commercially lauded Steven Soderbergh movie *Magic Mike* (2012), starring A-list actors Channing Tatum and Matthew McConaughey. *Love Shot* –the album-- also generated several single hits, including the title track, "Fame and Glory" and "Run to the Sun," as well as the Nabiha-assisted duet, "Love Radar."

The band has seen over 65 placements in movies, trailers and TV, including: *The First Time, Magic Mike, American Reunion, The Boys Are Back, Fright Night, That's My Boy* (movies); *Dallas, Hellcats, NCIS, CSI, 90210, Entourage, Hard Times of RJ Verger, Common Law, Lie to Me, Shameless, Body of Proof, Call Be Fitz, Revenge, Last Man Standing, Private Practice* (TV); and Samsung T-Mobile, Apple (iPad), Red Lobster (advertising).

The Blue Van are also two-time BMI TV Music Award winners in 2010 and 2012 for their track "Independence," which was named the Best TV Theme Song for the show *Royal Pains*. The TV series has been broadcast in more than 20 countries, including the USA, England and Scandinavia.

Grooves and large arenas – the quartet throws away their humility

While The Blue Van's first two albums were very loyal to the '60s rock sound, they broadened their scope and their musical spectrum during the last couple of years. There was a shift towards more modern rock epics with larger arrangements, resulting in songs about the bliss of love, power ballads, hard-hitting heavy rock and authentic glam.

The Blue Van released their fourth album *Love Shot* in 2010 and it was the natural continuation of *Man Up*. To a greater extent, the songwriting was divided between Hammond organist/guitarist, Christensen and Westmark. The approach widened their scope and sound.

Love Shot housed both the patented '60s rock sound as well as moments reminiscent of '70s progressive and heavy style that called to mind early incarnations of The Stooges and even Kiss. From the very first bass strike of the opening track "Mama's Boy" to "Beg Like a Dog" and "Loser Takes It All," the songs were hard-hitting and in your face. The band also included more pensive and thoughtful fare like "Run to the Sun" or "Fame And Glory." It is no coincidence that stadium rock was born in the '70s, where the blues rock's introverted energy evolved with extroverted sing-along refrains. That same trend can be traced in the trajectory of this quartet from Northern Jutland, who grew with the experience, for better or worse.

2012: Would You Change Your Life? – in the studio with Jon Schumann

The Blue Van then recorded their fifth full-length album at STC Studios in Copenhagen. the band spent the spring of 2012 recording with Jon "Joshua" Schumann, whose resume is littered with names like Kashmir, Kent, The Cardigans, Mew and more.

The album was titled *Would You Change Your Life?* The title nodded to the thematic basis of the album. Some time ago, a story about an Australian nurse, who had asked her dying patients this exact same question, hit the Danish media. And not surprisingly, the minds of those who were doing and to whom this question was posed were filled with regrets. The span of their regrets ran the gamut from how they had handled their family to their jobs and to disappointments about life in general. But now it was too late. Had your last hour come and you knew you were going to die, you would probably ask yourself the question: Did I live my life to the fullest?

A holistic album – classic song writing, that gets things swinging

A big question such as this demands a sacramental musical accompaniment. Here, The Blue Van stepped out of the rough, lo-fi-rock 'n' roll and instead increased the quality of the recordings. *Would You Change Your Life?* featured a gospel choir paired with magnificent vivid soundscapes, all the while sticking to the classic songwriting style, boasting groove and lots of percussion, making the music swing. In the studio, Schumann dubbed the music "electro-gospel," referring to both the grooving and droning elements, which were plucked from soul, hip-hop and the synthesizer world. The band added the warmth of analog and hand-playing elements, which were obviously and respectfully borrowed from roots and rock 'n' roll.

Prominent guest appearances on the album included Kim Menzer from Burning Red Ivanhoe, who played the flute, while singer Kristina Romby from Death Valley Sleepers joined The Blue Van, both in the studio and in the live realm.

Would You Change Your Life? reflected an outlook on life and thoughts on the world situation,

which does not differ from the band's earlier work. *Would You Change Your Life?* was a holistic album. Think of it this way – it's like throwing all four previous albums into the air and gathering elements from them all as they fall back to earth. There is the unfiltered wildness from *The Art of Rolling*; the soft analog mood pictures from *Dear Independence*; and the bombastic and high fidelity rockers from *Man Up* and *Love Shot*, all assembled in an updated, sparkling rock opus delivered by one of Denmark's most appreciated live orchestras.

2014 - Killing the album format

In 2014, The Blue Van began a new journey. Despite their respect for and adherence to classic form and structure, they realized that it was time to let go of the familiar album format as we know it. Times have changed and The Blue Van are changing with them, as opposed to kicking and screaming and trying to avoid change, which so many of their global peers are doing and failing at. In 2014, The Blue Van are solely releasing singles and videos. No. More. Albums.

"It's all about thinking in new directions and doing things differently, because the world is different now," Westmark noted. This method of releasing singles and videos is not as groundbreaking as it might sound. In fact, The Blue Van are still taking their cues, respectfully so, from legends. Westmark continued, "At the same time, our approach to releasing music is very much old school. The Beatles, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and others did just the same in the old days."

Tailoring their approach to the new consumer habit of digesting singles and videos, The Blue Van are no longer behaving in a way that is customary. Fans should not expect a reduction in output; instead, it is a change in how the music is delivered and parsed out.

"The Beat Goes On," the first in a string of 10 singles, has been through the hands of the Dan Hougesen and Mark Wills production team. This dynamic duo, also involved in previous The Blue Van albums in production capacity, was focused on the musical vibe at the time of the recording. The "right here, right now" focus allows the singles to capture the band at whatever particular point of their musical development they are in. Also, new and spontaneous ideas are allowed to blossom instead of being put away for the next album, meaning fans do not have to wait for new material and output.

The Blue Van have embarked on quite a musical journey over the past decade and they remain firmly strapped in, with their loyal fans riding sidecar. They have no plans to get off this rock 'n' roll ride. They will just get from A to B a little differently.

Discography:

The Art of Rolling (2005, Album)

Dear Independence (2006, Album)

Man Up (2008, Album)

Love Shot (2010, Album)

Would You Change Your Life? (2012, Album)

"The Beat Goes On" (2014, Single)

CV:

Steffen Westmark: Vocals, guitars, songwriter, author of poetry collection *Abekatastrofer (Monkey Disasters)*, put out solo album *Deserter* under the moniker, S. Westmark in 2013.

Søren Christensen: Chorus, guitar, organ, songwriter; producer and songwriter in Bag of Tigers with Michelle Oakes; co-operates with and writes songs for Reptile Youth, Go Go Berlin, H.I.G.H, Xolo Island and Mathilde Falch.

Allan Villadsen: Bass; The Blue Van's full-time band accountant.

Per Mølgaard Jørgensen: Drums; drummer in alternative county-rock band The Mayflower Pussyfarm.