

Live previews: Babes in the woods

Sugababes Thetford Forest, Saturday

Here come the girls! With multi-million sales and sold out tours, Sugababes has become synonymous with



imaginative and effervescent pop. Their recently released album, *Catfights and Spotlights*, featured the smash hit *Girls* which continues on the success of a stash of classic pop singles like *Push The Button*, *Round Round*, and *Caught In A Moment*.

Supporting will be Alex Roots whose electro pop is heavily influenced by the 1980s. Surprising when she was born in 1992 but she grew up listening to Cyndi Lauper.

There will also be a special guest DJ set from Ironik, the 21-year-old urban superstar that took the charts by storm last year with his debut single *Stay With Me* and acclaimed album *No Point In Wasting Tears*.

He then teamed up with his friend and fellow artist Chipmunk to release the much anticipated third single from his album – *Tiny Dancer* ft Elton John.

■ Further listening: www.sugababes.com

The Magnolia Sisters Norwich Arts Centre, Wednesday

The Magnolia Sisters make their European debut. This highly respected all-female



band play many styles of French music from the deep south-west of Louisiana, giving a woman's voice to Cajun music while maintaining the soulful spirit and gutsy feel of the genre.

They are led by multi-instrumentalist, author, record producer and photographer, Ann Savoy, who collaborated with Linda Ronstadt on the Grammy nominated album, *Adieu False Heart*, sharing the lead vocal role with the legendary pop icon.

Ann has travelled world-wide with husband and accordionist Marc Savoy and fiddler Michael Doucet in the Savoy-Doucet Cajun Band and with her Savoy Family Band but this will be her first appearance with the sisters in the UK.

In addition to concerts The Magnolia Sisters also offer *Lapin Lapin*, their Cajun & Creole Children's Programme, including some Louisiana French vocabulary, tales of Cajun and Creole traditions such as making gumbo, with the chance for some role play, party games and dancing for fun.

■ Further listening: www.magnoliasisters.com

Sonic Boom Six Norwich Arts Centre, Thursday

From Manchester's dynamic musical landscape comes Sonic Boom Six. Few bands can so smoothly mix dancefloor-savvy elements of reggae, jungle and ska with



the rigorous commentary of hip-hop whilst retaining enough grit and aggression to be an active fixture of the UK punk scene.

A true product of their environment — the sound of a thousand city centre club-nights and student party mash-ups invigorate the righteous fury of distorted guitars and dubby grooves — Sonic Boom Six create an authentic sound.

They've just returned with their third album, *City of Thieves*. Whilst their eclectic punk soundclash staunchly remains far too down-to-earth to ever being described as 'prog', the album follows the concept of a collection of songs that explore and examine inner city life.

It is however built on the bedrock of the band's unique ska-core/hip-hop/jungle hybrid but adds dubstep, electro, dub and even glam rock to the mix, all the while retaining the snarling live edge honed by recent tours.

■ Further listening: www.sonicboomsix.co.uk

More than three decades into their career The Stranglers are easily the longest-surviving punk band to have come out of the 70s, shifting more than 30 million records along the way – one of which was inspired by Norfolk. Returning to the county for a special gig next Friday, **ROB GARRATT** talked to founding member JJ Burnel

Norfolk must be a very dear place to The Stranglers.

After shifting millions of records throughout the 70s and 80s, the iconic rockers were all but forgotten and left for dead by the turn of millennium.

Just over a decade ago bassist and driving force Jean-Jacques Burnel was living in the secluded Norfolk village of Holmes-next-the-Sea when the tiny parish was thrown into the national limelight.

The discovery of the 4,000-year-old Seahenge – a mystical bronze-era monument made up of 55 oak trunks circling a larger, upturned oak – inspired the rocker to write a whole album of new tunes.

2004's *Norfolk Coast* went on to become one of group's best acclaimed and biggest selling records, reasserting their place on the contemporary music scene. Its cover featured the band posing on Hunstanton beach.

They repaid the favour by headlining the county's largest free festival that year, *Kings Lynn's Festival Too* – the only free gig on their summer tour – and were back in the county a year later filming a movie inspired by the album.

Today Burnel talks of the record with the glazed inflexions of someone going over the band's surprise resuscitation for the umpteenth time.

"I was there when they found Seahenge," he retraces. "I was living about 400 yards from it – it was quite an inspiration."

"I just wrote a body of work which we used in the *Norfolk Coast* album and appeared in movies and stuff."

"I had an amazing time there and consequently the album that came out was really well received worldwide."

"It was inspired by the beauty of that coastline, and the seclusion, and what was going on in my head at that time."

Since *Norfolk Coast* the band's fortunes have continued to grow, with its 2006 follow-up *Suite XVI* keeping up the critical and commercial momentum.

Last year the punk veterans were enlisted for a string of high-profile festivals including *T in the Park*, *V Festival*, *Isle of Wight*, *Hyde Park* and *Oxygen* – on top of a 25-date sell-out tour.

"Everybody wanted to book The Stranglers last year," reasons Burnel stoically. "It's just how things work."

"We were up for it – some years you're really not up for it and just want to stay home in the studio."

Talking from his home "by the river" in Chiswick, the 57-year-old had the nonchalant air you would expect from someone integral to so many hit records; equal parts glazed arrogance and forced antipathy.

The reason for our chat is The Stranglers' appearance at *Blickling Hall*, near Aylsham, next Friday.

Despite his few-months in the county, he admits it will be his first visit to the 17th century stately home.

On a tour that also sees the stars playing major festivals in France,



Enduring punk sonics

Sweden, Holland, Greece and Portugal, why then are they coming back to Norfolk?

"Well it was offered to us," he said. "We get offered quite a lot of shows and weigh up if the money's right and if we can do it."

"We had the weekend free so we thought why not."

One can only assume the money at *Blickling Hall* was "right" for a band who have knocked up more than 40 chart hits over four different decades, a fact JJ is keen to remind me of.

But he sees nothing puzzling about the band's pairing with safe 80s rockers *Simple Minds*, whose commercial fare such as hits *Don't You (Forget About Me)* saw the band notch up multi-platinum record sales in the mid-80s.

"Last year we played with Amy Winehouse, and lots of other acts, such a variety," says Burnel, a known Karate pro and motorbike enthusiast.

"Music fans are being more open-minded now – unless you have a punk festival or a Goth festival. Just look at what happened in Glastonbury this year."

Typically a health-check of the modern music scene, this year's festival line-up included legendary headliners Neil Young (63), Bruce Springsteen (59), and Sir Tom Jones (69).

Are The Stranglers noticing a newfound appreciation for more established artists?

"We're getting a lot of young people coming to our shows as well as the older generation now," says Burnel, who will be celebrating his 58th birthday early next year.

"A lot of younger people are a bit cynical of bands their own age. It's because we've lasted the test of time, there's a certain credibility to what we're doing."

"We've probably had more hits than most people, and somewhere some of those songs must have stuck."

But he refused to offer any hint about what hits, hidden gems, or new material their *Blickling* set might offer.

"It's a surprise," he told me dryly. "We've had 42 top 40s, I don't know how many top 10 albums, we've sold 30 million records – so we've got quite a lot of material to choose from."

In 40 years the band had some killer hits – *Golden Brown* and *Peaches* among them – and inevitably some misses and

outright flops. I'd like to think that every album has been commercially and critically acclaimed," defends Burnel.

"Maybe some of them just hit. Maybe they were better than the others. Maybe they hit a nerve."

"Sometimes they just hit the zeitgeist, sometimes it's none of those."

This summer's tour also sees them return to their roots at *Guildfest*, back in the Surrey town where in 1974 they gathered in an off licence to christen themselves the *Guilford Stranglers*.

Soon after they ditched lingering post-60s psychedelic tendencies to become a lynchpin of the burgeoning punk scene, their edgy sound was credited with inspiring other larger bands around them.

"Joe Strummer from The Clash, Chrissie Hynde [lead singer of The Pretenders], they were all checking us out before they came up with their sound," remembers Burnel.

They scored their first hits in 1977 with *Something Better Change*, *No More Heroes*, and the ecstatic strut of *Peaches* – a rampant, chauvinistic celebration of observing semi-naked women with the refrain "walking down the beaches looking at the peaches."

But the bad-mannered jobs not only survived but outlived the limited shackles of punk, going on to make the political heavy *The Raven* at the turn of the decade, a record that dealt with themes from genetic engineering to the state of Iran.

The follow up *The Gospel According to The Meninblack* was a concept album exploring the connection between religious phenomena and extraterrestrial visitors.

It was their next album though, 1981's *La Folie*, that contained their biggest hit to date – *Golden Brown*, a delicate harpsichord-led ode to heroin.

The band's success continued throughout the 80s until lead singer Hugh Cornell flew the nest, notoriously calling the band a spent force.

"We've been written off so many times by record companies and critics alike," spits Burnel. "Now we're still here when many bands aren't."

The Stranglers are supporting Simple Minds at Blickling Hall, Blickling, on Friday, July 17. For tickets, priced at £37.50, call 0871 424 4444 or visit

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