



**[The Christians](#) at [The Liverpool Philharmonic](#)
Reviewed by [Jane Turner](#) September 2010**

It's back to the music of the 1980's with [The Christians](#) . A band from Liverpool fronted by Garry Christian, singing soulful songs with "socially aware" lyrics, likened by many to The Temptations and with a vast back-catalogue of great hits including "Ideal World", "Forgotten Town", "What's in a Word?" and many other great hits.

Autumn is my favourite season; too fair-skinned and hay-fever prone to really appreciate the Summer (even a British one), I like it when the air becomes a little cooler, the leaves turn to gold and red and there's that "back-to-school-feeling" in the air and everywhere feels just that little bit more mellow... but not this week. Instead of the usual gentle seasonal change, it was as if I was suddenly back in the '80's with a thud as loud as the crash of the Berlin Wall.

It was déjà-vu-ish alright, with talk in the news of the North-South divide, redundancies, rising unemployment, benefit cuts and "scroungers", the TUC declaring war on the Government and TV listings full of programmes with a distinctly '80's theme all set against the backdrop of multiple debt crises. It was vaguely familiar to someone who lived once-upon-a-time in the real-live 1980's.

To wind up the wacky week that was full of '80's parallels, I went to see The Christians, who way back in the real '80's were "top of the pops" and are still one of my all-time favourite '80's bands, producing such great soul-inspired hits as; Forgotten Town - 1987, Hooverville - 1987, When The Fingers Point - 1987, Ideal World – 1988, Born Again - 1988, Words – 1989, What's in a Word? - 1992 and a favourite with a local theme - "Greenbank Drive" (which was just around the corner from

where I used to live in Sefton Park).

Just like the week that wasn't quite the real '80's, The Christians are not quite the same band they used to be either. The original line up included three brothers; Garry, Roger and Russell Christian, but with the death of Russell in 1998 from a brain tumour, and Roger deciding he no longer wanted to tour, there's just Garry left from the early line-up that also included the much-missed and extremely talented singer-songwriter, vocalist and keyboard player Henry Priestman.

The new band though are a rather lively youthful bunch, that are almost, but not quite as good as the old line-up and include; Neil Griffiths, Joey Ankrah, Lionel Duke, Andy Chandler and Cliff Watson. Their unique selling point though is of course the one and only original Garry Christian, still the daddy of them all (could be too as he is probably decades older than all of them at fifty-something). He's hardly altered, still looking as cool as when I last saw him perform several years ago, and still attached to his Ray-Bans even in a pitch-black theatre. With his distinctive style, and natural good-looks, he is still unsurprisingly, a big hit with the female fans who turn out in droves every time he cares to put on a performance – which isn't that often. "You've still gorrit Gaz la" shouted one enthusiastic female fan in perfect scouse.

Garry, or Gaz to his fans, was rather at home in the comfort of his own back-yard in Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall. Hitting it off with the audience straight away by making jokes at his own expense by mocking his dress-sense - "shirt £10 - George at Asda" - or so he said in his usual self-effacing manner, and



d mocking his pointed patent-leather shoes and failing eyesight so much so that in-between songs he had the audience laughing with him and at him like a seasoned comedian. With family members in the audience and his 16 year old son Miles providing a perfect solo performance on saxophone during the encore, it felt like one great big homecoming party after such a long break from live performing. As well as an amazing voice, he has charm oozing from every pore, although I must confess to holding a slightly biased opinion, as many years ago before fame and fortune, he would sometimes drop in to my local pub to play pool with his brothers and I had a school-girlish type of crush on him. So he remains (in my eyes anyway) just simply gorgeous (no argument!).

And more to the point, can he sing? You bet! His voice is still as ever; deep and cavernous, velvet smooth and soulful. The band still create that old magical sound of great melodies, unforgettable lyrics and gospel-choir like harmonisation and acappella that should get them air-play for quite some time, although quite why they never had great commercial success still flummoxes me?

When they rose to fame in the late '80's, the band were noted for being "socially aware" and the lyrics were laden with messages, yearnings and morals that had wide-ranging resonance. It was their first major hit "Ideal World" (reached the top 20 in 1988) which grabbed my attention and when introducing this on stage, Garry commented on how fitting the words still are today, which was acknowledged by many in the audience:

"... your money fills their pockets, fear fills their tiny minds... they wont give in without a fight ... but how long must the people die before the guilty ones are caught ...at last the world is talking now, this aint no way to treat mankind ... I'd do all I can for an ideal world where we're free to choose, an ideal world where we're no longer born to lose ... spare a thought for an ideal world ...in the ideal world we can start again... ... a speck of blue up in the sky, a song of hope, a noble thought ..."

Many of The Christians' hits are a combination of sensitive and reminiscent lyrics, soulful harmonies and memorable tunes backed by polished instrumentals. Many old hits have been re-vitalised and brought up to date with more contemporary instrumentation and less reliance on the old '80's synthesiser-sound that was popular and much-used back then. With such a vast back-catalogue of great numbers, it didn't seem to matter that they hadn't written many new songs in a while, although Garry promised that a new album is "on it's way" and they did perform their recently released cover version of Cat Stevens' "Where do the Children play?".

The words to their first single "Forgotten Town" also seemed rather appropriate, in a week where many were making comparisons with the '80's. Much of the news in the North-West has been of town centres in decline with half-empty high streets, boarded up shops and pubs next to derelict wasteland; all reminiscent of '80's Britain. Interviewing workers on their way out of the factory gates of BAE who announced more redundancies this week, one worker said that "there are no local industries left around here". So I suppose these lyrics written in 1987 could just as well apply to today:

"Well should I stay and fight? Where else is there I can run?"

*How can I get out? There's no way I can get out!
Hear the hollow words a-ringing now the chips are down.
This must be one of the troubles of a-living in forgotten town"*

In a week when there were many echoes of the '80's, there was much commentary about public sector job cuts, and how many Northern towns, largely reliant on such work, will be devastated by the spending cuts. One news report I heard said that places like Liverpool and Middlesbrough would be ruined and planned housing developments shelved leaving whole geographical areas boarded up and un-developed.

So the lyrics to Hooverville seem spookily familiar too, even though they were written in the '80's (Hooverville was the name given to shanty towns built by homeless people in America's great depression under President Hoover):

*"The doubt of work sends the out of work man,
To city a hope and a home.
One door shuts here another two slam,
Yes he's homeless he's hopeless alone....
Oh Hooverville, and they promised us the world,
In Hooverville, said the streets that were paved with silver and gold,
Oh Hooverville, and they promised us a roof above our heads,
in Hooverville,
And as fools we believed every last word they said....."*

The lyrics to "What's in a word?" an almost anthem-like protest song, sung with mood and heart by Garry to a catchy and improved musical arrangement, are also pertinent in 2010:

*"Oh, yes it's hard, it's getting harder
To turn the cheek or just walk away
When all I see is degradation
Day after day*

I wanna fight, my hands are tied

*My weapons are pitiful
And all that's left
One troubled mind, one timid voice
Such a desperate noise*

*What's in a word, more than you imagine
What's in a word, more than I can say
Once in a while you can hear such sweet sounds
Freedom's singing in your head, in your head".*

There were plenty of uplifting songs and some of love, regret and loss, no doubt reflecting the writers own ups and downs and all sang in that distinctly Christians style, with great melodies, heavenly harmonising and of course the unique and resounding voice of Garry Christian. Encouraged by Garry to "get out of your seats and make the most of it" the performance ended with The Christians' rousing cover version of The Isley Brothers' "Harvest For The World" and possibly lifted the roof of The Philharmonic Hall - just a little.

