

Return of the queen of pop

By Simon Coates

CLARE Grogan was starring in Neil Simon's rom-com Barefoot In The Park at the 2020 Pitlochry Festival Theatre when lockdown kicked in. "I was doing my first play in seven years and it got shut down two nights after we opened. I thought we'd all be back together to finish what we started within weeks. Of course, that didn't happen, and I really struggled at the start," says Clare. "Once I accepted that we were probably in for the long haul I decided to make life at home as pleasurable as possible as normally I'm on the move with work and feeling guilty about it."

One of the few benefits of all the lemons that the Covid-19 pandemic handed out is the lemonade that came out the other end.

"When I got to pause during the lockdown I found the space in my head to write again. It really started with just one song – The Colour Of My Dreams – and it grew from there. I'm lucky that I live with a genius record producer, and we just started having a bit of fun. Also, we'd watched all the box sets, drank all the wine and ate all the crisps..."

The result is Mascara Streakz, the first Altered Images album since 1983.

Browsing her career timeline, it's clear that Grogan has sprinkled her special brand of magic over virtually every sector of the arts, in one way or another, over the years.

Born in Glasgow in 1962, she's been (and remains) a television, stage and film star, author, and radio presenter.

Other achievements aside, though, Grogan will be fondly regarded as the voice of early 1980s band Altered Images. Melding candied vocals with post-punk guitar melodies, Altered Images were the new wave band that even your mom liked, keenly remembered for the pop shapes of Happy Birthday, Pinky Blue, I Could Be Happy and more.

A long-time North London resident, Grogan is married to producer and original Altered Images band member, Stephen Lironi.

So, what can we expect from Mascara Streakz? Is it vintage Altered Images?

"I wanted this album to sound really fresh and now," says Clare. "I wanted it to sound like Altered Images in 2022. For inspiration I did go back and listen to a lot of the music that first made me want to be in a band. That included Simple Minds, The Tom Tom Club, Kraftwerk, Blondie... I wanted to relive my



enthusiasm as a 17-year-old performer and bring it right up to date."

Alongside Lironi's production input, the album also features vignettes from producer and ex-Suede guitarist Bernard Butler and Bobby Bluebell (from The Bluebells – remember their 1984 hit, Young At Heart?). How did all that happen?

"Bernard lives around the corner from me, and I've been a long-time fan of his creativity. We were friendly but I was still nervous asking him to get involved," Grogan says. "Thankfully he did, and we created two glorious tracks together – Glitter Ball and Home – which we also co-wrote with Bobby (or Robert as I call him) and Stephen."

"I've known Robert since I was about nine, but Beautiful Thing is the first track we'd ever written together."

The third track to be added to streaming

platforms ahead of the album's release, Glitter Ball is a sparkly disco banger. However, it's Grogan's voice – accent slightly mid-Atlantic, delivery slightly breathy – that gives it that unmistakable Altered Images twinkle.

Besides working on Mascara Streakz over the past couple of years, Grogan has also been involved in My Old School, the debut feature from Scottish filmmaker Jono McLeod.

"It's a drama documentary starring the brilliant Alan Cumming, based on a true story about an adult man called Brian MacKinnon who went back to his old school and posed as a schoolboy," she says.

MacKinnon's posing was so convincing that, despite being 30 at the time, in 1995 an East Dunbartonshire school accepted his assertion that he was a 17-year-old boy called Brandon Lee.

A couple of years ago, McLeod tracked

Clare Grogan has enjoyed a varied career in music, film and stage, but she is best remembered for her work with Altered Images

MacKinnon down to ask him how on earth it all happened. MacKinnon agreed to be interviewed, but not filmed – so Cumming is cast in the film playing MacKinnon as he is now, lip-synching his recorded replies.

Elsewhere, McLeod uses animation to tell the stories related by others who knew (or thought they knew) Lee the schoolboy, and Grogan voices some of the animated characters, along with Lulu and others.

The new album, the pop anthems, the films, plays – that's some career. What, though, is the favourite she's ever done?

"I love working and I have been fortunate enough to work on lots of really great things," she says. "I can't have favourites. I appreciate everything I get to do."

Altered Images' Mascara Streakz is released on August 26 on the Cooking Vinyl label

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