

arts

'I'm not rocking up in a Bentley. Not yet'

Can British guitar bands still make a good living? Luke Pritchard, leader of the Kooks, hopes so, he tells
Will Hodgkinson

What is a British guitar band to do when their first album sells more than two million copies, their second coincides with a backlash, and by the time they get their third album together, British guitar rock is on the verge of collapse?

"There are only a few of us still going," says Luke Pritchard, the singer and songwriter for the Kooks, on bands of his million-selling, guitar-toting ilk. "Serge Pizzorno from Kasabian recently claimed they're the only band left that matters, which is arrogant but I get what he's saying. When it comes to headlining festivals, who's left? I don't see the Arctic Monkeys as headliners. Coldplay and Radiohead have been doing it for years. That leaves us. We've done well, but I'm not rocking up in a Bentley to my mansion with a swimming pool. Not yet, anyway."

It's the week of release for *Junk of the Heart*, the Kooks' new album, and although it has reached Top Tens across Europe and garnered a few nice, if not ecstatic, reviews, Pritchard comes across as a man on an extended comedown. He's as low-key as you can be when your band has sold millions of albums. The night before the interview I spotted him skulking about in the shadows of a tiny underground folk gig at a venue in East London, looking much like any other curly-haired, 1960s-tinged, underground folk dude. When the Kooks first broke through, however, Pritchard did let the attention get the better of him.

The band's first album, *Inside In/Inside Out*, crept up on British audiences in 2006 to become one of the biggest albums of the decade. Its chief songwriter, barely out of his teens, made the most of it, with celebrity girlfriends including Mischa Barton and Georgia Jagger, and some high-profile feuds with other bands (Pritchard kicked Alex Turner, of the Arctic Monkeys, in the face during a gig in Sheffield). He also made some unwise comments. "I want our singles to come on the radio and for people to literally have their heads blown off by them," Pritchard said in 2008.

Inevitably, things began to unravel. "From our second album on, I began to feel life spiral out of control," Pritchard says. "The balance went. There was friction in the band. The negative and the positive attention affects you, and then you aren't fulfilled creatively so you get depressed. Then you wonder why you can't write a tune any more."

The Kooks' response was to decamp



Brighton rock: the Kooks, from left, Paul Garred, Peter Denton, Luke Pritchard and Hugh Harris

to a cottage in Norfolk for a few weeks in 2009, to shut out disabling influences, become friends again, and concentrate on writing more of the accessible, emotional pop that has seen the band find the missing link between indie rock and radio-friendly pop. "We had a great time," Pritchard says. "It was like *Withnail and I*. But we threw out pretty much everything we wrote."

Further recording sessions resulted in an entire album being scrapped, so the band decamped to Los Angeles and made a new album from scratch. "It's psychological: once you're on a plane to live somewhere else for a while, your

“We got signed. That’s where the problems started”

mind goes to a different place. So part of the reason for moving to California was to reinvent ourselves, to completely refresh and evolve."

Pritchard goes on to talk about the Kooks' discovery of "beat systems" (programmed as opposed to drummer-led beats), the influence of the futuristic Swedish pop star Lykke Li and new ways of working that involved each member recording his parts separately, although this might have had as much to do with the four Kooks getting on each other's nerves as it had with pioneering experiments in sound.

"It was hard, man," Pritchard says.

"We had to completely reinvent ourselves." The resulting album is, well, not very experimental at all. It's a Kooks album, filled with cheery songs about girls.

"The goal is for a song to sound simple, but to have complexities hidden within it," Pritchard avers. "I like pop songs. I want us to make music that's similar to the songs I like. That gets misunderstood."

The misunderstanding started at a young age. Pritchard's father died when he was 3, leaving behind a record collection that included albums by Bob Dylan, Buddy Holly and Sam Cooke. "I was a Dylan freak from the age of 12 onwards," he says. "I would be blasting Dylan at school and older kids would throw the CD out of the hi-fi and put on the Wu-Tang Clan. People took the piss out of me for liking Dylan."

After a spell at Bedales, the liberal boarding school where Lily Allen was a classmate, Pritchard moved to the Brit School, the South London comprehensive with a strong performing arts strand that has thrown out such mainstream pop stars as Adele, Leona Lewis and Katie Melua. "The music class at the Brits was brilliant," Pritchard says. "There were only 15 of us on it and we were all pretty good. By then I was obsessed with the 1960s while everyone else was into urban music, though, so it was frustrating."

The answer was to move to Brighton, enrol at the Institute of Modern Music, and form the Kooks with three fellow students, including the band's classically-trained guitarist Hugh Harris. "We lived in a bohemian bubble of creativity in which everyone knew

Brit School hit school

Adele

Graduated from the Croydon fame factory with *X Factor* winner Leona Lewis in 2006; now worth £6 million.

Amy Winehouse

She shared naughty cigarettes with her fellow pupil, the singer-songwriter Jamie Woon.

Jessie J

The Brit winner's tutelage clearly didn't include interviews. She recently said that a foot injury had given her "a different respect for people who don't have legs".

Katie Melua

Was it at the school that the jazz-pop siren learnt the crucial difference between "feeling 22, acting 17", as she sang on her debut single?

everyone and we all got on," he says. "Then we got signed. That's where the problems started."

The Kooks went from being "the little kids, the wannabe Strokes" to signing to Island and recording an album in London in the space of a few months. "Man, people didn't like that, and I used to get so much shit when I went back to Brighton. We dealt with it by writing all the time and working fast. Before long we had over 100 songs and we had recorded an album."

Now the Kooks are looking into ways of being a band with longevity. We think of older musicians that have remained creative; I suggest Lou Reed. "I would agree with you, except I went to see him and I wanted to cry," Pritchard says. "Dylan still has it. Neil Young always concentrates on the music. The Stones kept it fresh for years, even when they were smashed out of their heads, because great songs were always the things that mattered most. That's why I'm hopeful because, forget the gigs, forget the studio, forget everything else: when you write a song in which something happens... it's such a buzz."

Will great songs be enough to pull British guitar music out of its morass? Pritchard thinks so. "When I was 13 or 14 it was all about dance music and nobody wanted to form a band with me," he concludes. "Then the Strokes came along and everything changed, everyone wanted to be in a band. It will happen again. Someone will come along. As for us, we're not going to be the biggest band in the world, but we'll be OK. There will always be a Kooks way of doing things."

Junk of the Heart is out now on Virgin