

# Brian Auger

The Flamingo. Oblivion Express. Acid Jazz. Steampacket.

Words Andy Thomas Portrait Tim Hans

Photographs courtesy of Brian Auger

IN THE LATE 1980s the British Hammond organ maestro Brian Auger became the 'Godfather of Acid Jazz' for a new generation of modernists inspired by the past. His late 1960s and early 1970s albums with his bands Brian Auger & the Trinity (including his LPs with singer Julie Driscoll) and Oblivion Express spawned club tracks such as 'Indian Rope Man' and 'Whenever You're Ready'. "Oblivion Express were the band that invented the acid jazz sound, that uniquely British movement that came to prominence some 25 years after this album was recorded," wrote Eddie Piller, founder of the Acid Jazz record label, in the sleeve notes to the reissue of the 1973 LP *Closer To It!*. First becoming aware of the Hammond player through Auger's mod connections in 1960s Soho, Piller called him "a real musical hero who helped establish the Hammond organ as the weapon of choice for a whole host of British jazz players".

Greg Boraman (ex A&R man at Acid Jazz) was one of those Hammond players to have been influenced by Auger. As well as playing for the Soul Destroyers and the

Fantastics!, Boraman now runs Freestyle Records. Since its birth in 2003, the London label has been spearheading the new wave of deep funk, soul, Latin and jazz, and can be seen as the natural successor to Acid Jazz. And it has now released the first serious Brian Auger anthology to celebrate the many sides of his 50 years in music. Alongside those pivotal Hammond recordings from the mod and fusion years, *Back to the Beginning* also shines a light on his lesser-known jazz trio recordings from the early 1960s, as well as those from the mod blues band Steampacket (featuring Rod Stewart, Long John Baldry and Julie Driscoll).

The second part of this revival arrives later in the year, in the form of a live LP with Oblivion Express, featuring Auger's son Karma on drums and original singer Alex Ligertwood. The session was recorded in 2013 in LA, where Auger has lived since the 1980s. And nearly half a century since he first picked up the Hammond B3 after hearing Jimmy Smith's *Back at the Chicken Shack* LP, Brian Auger sounds as fiery and funky as ever. As he

prepares to bring Oblivion Express to Europe for a series of gigs in the autumn, we catch up with him at his home in LA.

## You were born in London in 1939. Where were you brought up?

I lived in Latimer Road in north Kensington until 1944, just before my fifth birthday, when we were bombed out. A V-1 bomb dropped on a row of houses behind ours. My mum heard this thing and threw me under the table in the living room, and the whole place came down around us. Fortunately for us, although the house was totally destroyed, we were all unscathed.

## Was it a musical household?

Yes, there was music in the house all the time – my mum and dad really liked light operatic stuff. My dad was a very Victorian guy and he had a player piano [self-playing piano] and a whole cupboard of these piano rolls – an amazing collection, with all the operas, some overtures and lots of ragtime, which I loved. From the age of about three, I was totally in love with this >





Julie Driscoll and Brian Auger, Brussels, 1968

thing and learned how to put the piano roll in. It was driven by air and there was a pair of pedals and I used to be able to stand on the pedals, hang on the underneath of the keyboard and pedal away. I was just totally fascinated – and that was it for me.

**You had an older brother who had a big jazz collection.**

First of all my two older sisters were totally in love with Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra. But yes, my eldest brother had the most influence on me because he had a collection of American jazz records. So I was listening to Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Lionel Hampton, Benny Goodman, and all these people. So that was the whole mix of stuff I grew up around until we were bombed out. Then I was evacuated away with my sister for two years to Batley [in Yorkshire]. Fortunately for me, the household had a proper piano. I learned to play ‘In the Mood’ by Glenn Miller and they would invite the neighbours in and I would go through my party piece.

**What was it like when you moved back to London?**

When I got back they moved us to Shepherd’s Bush. We had been away for more than two years and it was very strange for me. I knew my dad was my dad but I was so young I wasn’t sure about the rest of it. But I went into the front room and there was the piano. So all of a sudden I was like, yeah I’m home. And then I would listen to more of the jazz records my brother had got. I was about seven now.

**When did you start mimicking the jazz you were hearing?**

It was one of those things that dawned on me when I would be wandering around whistling to myself. After a while I realised I was whistling over a 12-bar blues. At the time a musician was an absolute non-profession, so there was no effort to send me to piano lessons or anything like that. I was just left on my own. I picked things up off the radio and started to get it all together by ear. And then I heard some boogie-woogie on the radio. Winifred Atwell was one of the great boogie-woogie players and so I started to play boogie-woogie whenever I got near a piano. People used to love that stuff at parties. At the time everyone would

rent a bus and go with all their friends down to Southend to see the illuminations. But it was really a good excuse for all the guys to go on a pub crawl. And they would take me along to play the piano and pass the hat around for me – so that was pretty amazing.

**Were there any particular radio stations where you heard all the jazz?**

My brother had this huge radio – I think it was a Ferguson. It had a big knob that you could turn to catch all the different stations. And he gave me this when I was about 10. So I rigged up an antenna and hung it out of my bedroom window. I used to wait until my parents had gone to sleep and I’d be dialling around. Then all of a sudden I heard this voice say, “This is the American Forces Radio in Germany – we present Jazz Hour.” And the Stan Kenton Orchestra came and on and blew me away. And I used to bombard my local record shop WG Stores in Shepherd’s Bush Market and ask them if they had this stuff. I actually asked them for two years for Oscar Peterson’s ‘Tenderly’ and they eventually found a 78 for me.

**When did you get a band together?**

I got a scholarship to go to a grammar school. The first thing I spotted was this piano on the stage. It was a beautiful Bechstein piano and it sounded incredible. I was itching to get my hands on it but couldn’t figure how to do that. But then I waited one day until everyone had gone home and I leapt onto the stage and started playing ‘Cross Hands Boogie’ by Winifred Atwell. It sounded absolutely amazing on this piano but around the corner came my headmaster. He was this really old guy from the Empire and he had this insane voice that started in a falsetto and came down. So he said, “What kind of devil music is that?” I replied, “It is called boogie woogie sir.”

Anyway the school would have a Friday solo given by a violin player or something and amazingly he invited me to play. So I let forth with ‘Cross Hands Boogie’ and instead of the usual shuffling around there was like a football roar at the end of it. And so I got to play regularly on Fridays. Then I started to hear all the Blue Note and in particular the hard bop of Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers. And I got myself into a band and we played

at pubs and clubs doing all the Jazz Messengers stuff.

There was this club in Southall called the Octave, and the Green Man in south London – all over the place in fact. This was a quintet with vibes, alto, piano, bass and drums, called the Dave Morse Quintet. Playing that material sorted out a lot of harmony for me.

**And you also had a trio that played the clubs of Soho.**

The original jazz piano trio, which I named the Brian Auger Trinity, was myself, Rick Laird on upright bass, and Phil Kinorra on drums. We played with most of the guys on the scene – so Tubby Hayes, Ronnie Scott, and then at the Flamingo with all sorts of people. They would call me and say they wanted a piano trio to open for someone or other.

**How was it playing at Soho clubs such as Ronnie Scott’s and the Flamingo?**

Soho was incredible back then. And to actually play there was amazing because it was like, wow, I’m playing in the West End. But the Flamingo was particularly special.

**The Flamingo became known as one of the hubs of the mod scene. When did you become aware of the scene and how connected did you feel to it?**

In the beginning it wasn’t known as mod or anything, but I was really into the Ivy League look of the hip jazz players from New York. There was one place in Shaftesbury Avenue – Cecil Gee – and they would import these clothes. Or we could get a suit made that would copy that. So these were the clothes I used to play in.

**Obviously the Hammond organ changed everything for you. When did you first hear Jimmy Smith?**

I was wandering past my local record shop one day and I heard this sound. And I thought, oh my god what is that? The only other organ I heard was the theatre one up in Blackpool Tower, and in the break at the movies when this big Wurlitzer would come up and play ‘The Dam Busters March’ or something. The sounds of these organs were so foreign to playing jazz. So when I first heard Jimmy Smith I really couldn’t figure out what this was. When I discovered that it was a Hammond organ he was playing I went, oh my goodness.

**When did you first play it?**

The people at the Flamingo decided to lease the weekends to a couple of guys called Rik and Johnny Gunnell. These guys started putting on bands like Georgie Fame & the Blue Flames, Zoot Money’s Big Roll Band, The Chessmen, Graham Bond and Chris Farlowe. So it was tons of these R&B bands. I got a call one day from Rik and he says, “Brian, you got to help me out, Georgie went down to Cornwall over the weekend and fell asleep on the beach and he’s got sunburn. He had to be taken to hospital.”

So Rik told me to be at the Roaring Twenties in Soho at 8pm. When I got there and the guys were putting everything together, I said, “There’s no piano, where’s the piano?” And they said, “That’s Georgie’s organ over there, you’re playing that.” I looked at the Hammond with all these switches, knobs and dials and thought, don’t

## ‘WHAT KIND OF DEVIL MUSIC IS THAT? IT’S CALLED BOOGIE WOOGIE SIR’

panic, just try and make it sound as close to Jimmy Smith as you can. So that’s what I did. I remember coming off the stage dripping in sweat, and one of the regular guys came up and said, “I didn’t know you played organ Brian, how long you been playing organ?” And I said, “Well, about 45 minutes.” So that was my introduction to the Hammond. And then I bought my own Hammond B3 and that changed the whole direction of everything for me.

**So it was through the organ that you really connected with the R&B and rock scene?**

There was so much jamming going on in the 1960s that I completely changed my outlook. I was originally one of those jazz snobs who looked down on the burgeoning rock society. I used to

think it was three or four chords and that was about it. But when I actually got into playing the real blues with people like Clapton and Jeff Beck, I saw things differently. This wasn’t the place to unleash every lick you know – it’s a feel and if you don’t play the feel right, it doesn’t work. So it taught me a big lesson and I began to look at all the amazing creative bands that were coming out and I quickly got over my jazz snobbism.

**And this led to you joining the Steampacket?**

Yes that was 1965 with Long John Baldry, an unknown Rod Stewart and Julie Driscoll, with Micky Waller, Ricky Brown and Vic Briggs. We ran that band for two years and we were covering so much material, including Jimmy Smith and my own compositions. Julie would sing some Tamla Motown or Nina Simone, Rod would come on and do Chicago blues, and then John would do some gospel stuff. It was really a great success, and if it wasn’t for the fact that we all had different managers arguing for two years, we might have gone in a whole other direction. But it broke up sadly.

**The Steampacket were known as a mod band, right?**

Well yes, but towards the end the whole thing changed from Ivy League to the Chelsea Antiques Market look. All the old secondhand stuff became really popular.

**That was very much the look of the later period of the Trinity. What was the thinking behind the new band?**

Because I’d been playing across this huge spectrum of music, I had a good idea that I wanted my own band to reflect all these different feels. I knew what I wanted and that was a funk rhythm section, overlaid by what I was doing with jazz, and then a guitar player who could do both jazz and rock. These were difficult people to find at the time. I guess I wanted a drummer like Bernard Purdie and a bass player like James Jamerson, if I could find them, and a singer with a lot of soul. And that turned out to be Julie Driscoll.

**How did you come across Julie?**

We had the same manager and I was called in to do some sessions with her. >



Brian Auger's Oblivion Express, London, 1971

And when I heard her I just thought, wow. And when I talked to her about the singers and bands she liked I thought, here's a find. So when I heard she was interested in joining the Trinity I was really happy. And it then took off right away. After the *Open* album it really moved up a gear, particularly in Europe. And we ended up headlining the Berlin Jazz Festival, the purest of all the jazz festivals.

#### What was that like?

That was amazing really. It was like the boundaries breaking down right in front of you. I remember looking down into the audience at the Philharmonic Hall and there were all these kids there. So it cut across everything. I did wonder how it would go though. Because I had lime green crushed velvet trousers on and all this stuff from Chelsea Antiques Market, and about 50 people in the crowd started to boo. I wasn't having any of that so I told them, "Hey, maybe you don't like what I wear, but until you hear what I play you have no right to boo." Then there was loads of cheering and we did our set and people loved it.

#### Where did the psychedelic influence come from?

It all came around Haight-Ashbury time in San Francisco and the Monterey Jazz Festival and Woodstock,

## 'THE ONLY OTHER ORGAN I HEARD WAS THE THEATRE ONE UP IN BLACKPOOL TOWER'

so we'd seen and heard all the stuff like that. When I recorded 'This Wheel's On Fire', for example, I tried to aim the production to give it a kind of psychedelic sound – using a phaser on

the strings and just experimenting. You couldn't buy this kind of equipment, but the British are really good at coming up with something out of the shed at the bottom of the garden. And our engineer Eddy Offord was only 18, but he made this great big shoebox-sized thing with a great big knob on the front of the needle. He said, listen to this. And played the phaser on the strings and turned the knob and I went, oh my god – keep that in. So there were all these things popping up not only with fashion and bands, but also all the studio guys who were helping us achieve what we were looking for.

#### When did you first go to America?

We first went out with the Trinity and Julie in 1969 and did a tour there. It went quite well considering the band was falling to pieces at that time. The reason was the management really drove Julie too hard. It caused terrible repercussions. But the tour had some great moments – at the Fillmore East we got two encores. The only person to have got two encores before was my good buddy Jimi Hendrix.

#### Can you tell me how Hendrix came to play with the band in London?

I got a phone call one night in 1966 and it was Chas Chandler from the Animals and his manager. Just prior to this I had put the Trinity together and I knew exactly where I wanted to go with it. Anyway they said they'd brought this guy over from America who was a fantastic guitar player and they wanted him to front the band. What was I supposed to do, I had Julie and the whole band together and they were offering me this guitar player I had never heard before. I told them I wasn't interested. I suggested they bring him down to the Cromwellian on Friday. That was a late club where all the bands would play.

I knew that anyone who's anyone would be there and said he could sit in with the band. So the time came and at the break they brought Jimi up and introduced me. He played this sequence of chords to me that turned out to be 'Hey Joe'. In the audience were Clapton, Beck, Alvin Lee, everyone was there that night. Anyway he came on and he started to play. I did a double take because even though I really admired all the British blues players, you could still hear the sources. In Jimi

it was something else and such a unique voice. I thought, where has this guy come from? So then we became friends and he'd come down to where we were playing, so maybe Blaises and the Bag O'Nails, and would sit in with us. And we would hang out at Zoot Money's house at Barons Court and we'd listen to all the new records all night. It was like a meeting of everyone.

#### Did Jimi influence you?

I liked the things he did because he exposed me to the really exciting things you can do with an instrument. But my soloing really came from all the saxophone players that I had listened to. So it was the hard bop blues-edged sax thing. Of the pianists, Oscar Peterson was an influence as well as Victor Feldman, who was a fantastic player. But when it came to the Hammond, that really needed a different technique. If you play it like a piano, that is what it will sound like. So it was like travelling backwards in some way, because I had to give up some of my technique in certain areas to make the instrument speak the way I wanted it to.

#### How did Oblivion Express come about?

With the Trinity, we had all this success that bordered into the pop thing. Julie was being chased by the paparazzi, which was OK for about six months and then it got really too much. So I thought, to hell with it, I'm going to form a new band and I want to press on with this idea of rock, jazz, classical and everything. I had all this energy to push forward so I got the first Oblivion Express together. I had Barry Dean on bass, Robbie McIntosh on drums, Jim Mullen on guitar, and Alex Ligertwood on vocals. The idea was to roll on and push the envelope forward, but the record company didn't want that at all. They wanted me to keep doing the same winning formula we had with the Trinity. So I thought maybe I'm pushing against the commercial tide here and maybe I'm going to oblivion – so to hell with it, I'll call it the Oblivion Express. And the funny thing is, it's still called that after all these years.

#### When did you find out *Closer To It!* had become such a big influence on the acid jazz scene of the 1980s?

I was kind of shocked because I heard

that people were having these big parties and imbibing certain substances and having a great time dancing to my music. And they were calling it acid jazz. Then some of these bands who were playing at these parties were saying, "Brian Auger – he is the 'Godfather of Acid Jazz'." And this kind of carried on. Then, when I found out there was a label called Acid Jazz, I finally met up with Eddie Piller and he said, "Don't you realise the template for Acid Jazz was the *Closer To It!* album?" And I went to some of these parties and they were playing stuff off the Trinity *Streetnoise* album like 'Indian Rope Man' and 'Listen Here', the Eddie Harris number from the *Befour* album, and everyone was boogying away to it.

#### How did you feel when you heard it connect with the new young audience?

Absolutely great. That is the whole point in this, to bring the new generations through.

#### And the Oblivion Express that you are about to bring to Europe now includes your son Karma on drums.

I first played with him in 1990 in a band with Eric Burdon. He was hired as a roadie but meanwhile he was playing drums. There were always board tapes of the concerts we did. And he would take them away and go into his room and play to them. One afternoon Eric came around and Karma was upstairs playing drums. And Eric said, "Who the hell is that?" I told him it was Karma. Three days before we were about to go, the drummer quit. So I suggested we bring in Karma. And that was it, he's been playing drums with me ever since. Karma has not only become a phenomenal drummer that everyone loves, he's also become a tremendous producer and engineer. He helps me a great deal, and I think at this particular stage in my life, if Karma wasn't around I don't think I'd have a band. It would all be too much. ■

*A compilation album* Back to the Beginning: The Brian Auger Anthology is out in July

Brian Auger's Oblivion Express: Live in Los Angeles is out in September [freestylerecords.co.uk](http://freestylerecords.co.uk)



Brian Auger Trinity, London, circa 1963 Photograph Lewis Morley