

Billy Childish: musician, painter and poet

‘The wildly prolific founder of The Stuckists talks about celebrity fans, his new album and why he’s ‘not bitter about anything’

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The day after I meet Billy Childish, the prolific painter, poet and rocker, he sends me an email detailing his daily routine. I had asked him how he generates so much work, including more than 40 poetry collections, approximately 150 albums and an annual solo art show (rotating between the London, Berlin and New York galleries who represent him). He got sidetracked when we spoke, but in true fastidious form, he didn’t like leaving a question partially answered.

He had written it as a list: “cold shower/feed cat/meditation/prayers/riting (werk on novel)” [sic]. This is followed by exercise, such as qigong, swinging traditional Indian clubs, yoga or sometimes a short run “with a pal”. After which he has a small breakfast, and can then “begin the day”.

On Sundays, he paints smaller pictures at his mum’s, and on Mondays he creates his 10ft canvases at his studio at Chatham Dockyard in Kent, where he worked as an apprentice stonemason 40 years ago.

Other days can be for poems or songs or sculptures, except for Thursday afternoons, when he drops in at the London art co-operative, L-13 Light Industrial Workshop, for “anti-art activities”, making woodcuts or designs satirical political posters (Donald Trump being his latest victim).

L-13 occupies a basement in Clerkenwell, an area of east London long associated with radicalism. The studio promotes “the disruptive betterment of culture”, an objective close to Childish’s heart. “I’m a successful painter now,” he says, lounging on the studio sofa, crammed in between printing

presses and other accoutrements of artistic subversion, “but I was told I would never be allowed to be, and that I made too many errors.” He was expelled from St Martin’s School of Art. “They sort of judged me, because I’m uneducated . . . and sound like I’ve worked in a dockyard.”

In 1999 he co-founded the Stuckist movement, which railed against the dominance of the Young British Artists’ conceptual art, in favour of contemporary figurative work. The Stuckist name was inspired by a dig from his ex-girlfriend, Tracey Emin, who had told him his art was “stuck” (although Emin has cited her years hanging out with Childish as her greatest influence). There are now 236 Stuckist groups across 50 countries, but Childish bowed out in 2001.

The night before we meet had seen the opening of his latest exhibition of paintings, at Carl Freedman Gallery in east London (Emin was there). His work pays no heed to fashion, with self-portraits and vast, milky landscapes in the traditions of Gustav Klimt, Vincent van Gogh and Edvard Munch.

However, we’re here to talk about music. Childish has a new album, SQ 1, and in May he will perform his first UK shows for six years. The gigs sold out within hours.

Childish has fronted many groups, including Thee Headcoats and Thee Milkshakes. His current ensemble, CTMF, also stars his wife Julie Hamper (Childish’s true surname).

CTM is how Chatham appears on railway tickets, and the F stands for the Napoleonic forts in the area. The Chatham Forts was a name he dreamt up in the 1970s, when he first wanted to be in a punk rock band. “But it can mean anything you want it to mean.” Some of his other suggestions are too rude to print here. “I’m good at games and ideas,” he grins.

The first song on the album is pure, organ-laden garage rock, with an incongruous title: “A Song for Kylie Minogue”. In his deadpan estuary English, he recounts a series of absurd celebrity encounters. “Kylie Minogue called me up on the phone/She was polite and I’m polite too so

we got on fine/She asked if she could use my poetry/ And I said help yourself girl it's all for free."



Billy Childish at his studio in London © Anna Huix

The next verse is about Kurt Cobain, who was another Childish fan. And another recalls Beck asking Childish (who had never heard of him) if he wanted to collaborate, and giving him his number. When Childish was next in LA, he dialled the number, only for someone to yell down the line: “Where did you get this number?”

Does he get a kick out of Kylie calling him? “It’s funny, but also I don’t like the music and that causes some problems. When I meet celebrity-type people they sometimes get upset because I’m not interested in who they think they are.” He only included people in the song whom he deems grown-up enough to not be bothered.

“I’m only rude really to the people I’m friendly with, and I’ve got a dark sense of humour and find lots of things highly entertaining.”

He does, however, have a reputation for being difficult. He has just pulled out of appearing at this month’s ATP festival, curated by the comedian Stewart Lee. “We found out there were 30 bands playing and it’s a weekend piss-up. I don’t like drunk people around me.”

Childish doesn’t drink, and rarely socialises outside of work or mentoring young artists. He is a visiting lecturer at Rochester Independent College and recently did some volunteer teaching at the school his six-year-old daughter attends (he also has a 16-year-old son). “Six-year-olds are already very worried about making mistakes,” he laments.

In the album, and throughout our conversation, he expresses frustration at the people who mistake him for a hipster (he has been widely imitated by today’s hirsute hipsters), a Luddite (he uses computers and a mobile phone, and his music is available for download), someone who cares about trends, crowd-pleasing, fame or money.

“I’m a fundamentalist,” he admits, “but not a fundamentalist hard-nut. I will compromise and work with anyone who wants to work for the better of the thing.”

People call him retro, but he refers to his output puckishly as “the sound of yesterday, tomorrow”. Another new song, “Glimpse of Another Time”,

recounts the scene at the St John's Tavern in north London. It's now a gastropub, but in the 1990s it was "an IRA pub all but. The back bar had flock wallpaper, with wagon wheels on the ceiling, and was called the Wild Western Rooms . . . You could see the origin of rock 'n roll. These were really strange places, you could see the continuum back in time."

Or, as he also says in relation to painting, "you could collapse time". There are two good reasons why Childish hasn't been playing live of late. Firstly, modern offstage sound mixing homogenises the raw, visceral sound he strives to create. And he dislikes the increasing separation between stage and crowd in venues. "I like being on that little stage and having the connection between me and my mates playing, the mistakes we make, and people enjoying it." Nowadays, he says, "They've got to be kept at a distance so you can't smell their breath or see their spots. It's just the most stupid world of celebrity nonsense."

However, his outlook seems more sanguine and spiritual than angry. "I don't hate anything, I'm not bitter about anything, I don't want to be anything. I like doing what I like and everything is jam for me. I live this wonderful life of freedom."

'SQ 1' is released by Damaged Goods on May 20

Photograph: Anna Huix