

‘It has all happened by accident’

By David Jenkins

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“We may not be good,” says Loyd Grossman, “but we *have* got style – and attitude.” The 57-year-old is not, heaven forfend, talking about his eponymous sauce empire but about his band, Jet Bronx and the New Forbidden.

He (Jet) and they (the New Forbidden) are rehearsing in a scuzzy studio underneath the arches below Putney Bridge Tube station. The ceiling is low, the furniture torn and frayed and, as Grossman says, “It’s got that same damp carpet and hot valve smell that’s impregnated into studios everywhere.” James Baring, by day an estate agent but now on bass, is not so tolerant: “I’m all for cred,” he says, peering despondently at the decrepit air-conditioning unit, “but I’m wondering if we aren’t being a bit too ‘street’ using this place.” Grossman’s having none of this: “It’s our studio of choice!” “Chosen because it’s cheapest,” chips in Charlie Wright, who’s on drums and designs websites for a living. Grossman sails on: “It brings a certain *reality* to our sound, unlike those clinical studio-based bands.” He pauses: “Actually, there was a very hot all-girl band rehearsing when we got here. They were very ... professional.” So, too, are Grossman and the band, for all their part-time status; their singer (and temporary keyboard player) is Valentine Guinness, once lead singer of the group Panic, for whom his ex-wife Lulu, the handbag queen, was once a backing singer. When Guinness arrives, a little late, Grossman – who is dressed in a “standard black Joseph suit”, black T-shirt and olive Converse trainers – is squeezing some dark and dirty riffs out of a 1968 Les Paul Goldtop he bought at New King’s Road Vintage Guitar Emporium, but it’s buzzing wildly (“We’re a very buzzy band”). Guinness addresses the troops: “What shall we play? Something we know. That’ll narrow it down.” Grossman looks up from his guitar: “Let’s start with ‘Ain’t Doin’ Nothing,’” he says. “One of the great punk anthems.”

One of the great punk anthems, indeed. “Ain’t Doin’ Nothing” was Grossman’s one (self-written) hit back in 1977, when he recorded as Jet Bronx and the Forbidden. “Jet Bronx because it sounded American, the Forbidden because it sounded attitudinal,” he says. (George Ford, who worked with Hall and Oates, was on bass, Stuart Elliott, who later worked with Cockney Rebel, on drums.) “It rocketed to number 49,” Grossman tells me the day after rehearsals. “It flared – and then it died.” His follow-up didn’t trouble the charts but Jet’s name lives on among historians of punk arcana.

That’s why Grossman’s got his new band together: they’re to play in August at Rebellion UK, a punk revival festival in Blackpool. “They were obviously dredging up the most obscure acts they could find,”

Grossman explains, “along with some quite well-known ones like Tenpole Tudor, Eddie and the Hot Rods, the usual suspects. So the organisers e-mailed me and ...”

Grossman is talking in the *soigné* surroundings of the Wolseley and he’s in more formal mode: a beautifully cut dark blue suit, striped shirt and tie. The Wolseley is a favourite of his and the staff know him well. Other current London likes include Nobu Berkeley; a “wonderful hole-in-the-wall” Japanese called Yoshino; Ziani (his local Italian in Chelsea, where he lives). He’ll be in Paris this weekend and will go to Brasserie Lipp: “There’s something so *real* about it, and so exciting. I don’t like poncey food. I’m awestruck by chefs like Alain Ducasse but I like ... recognisable food.”

Grossman, of course, is most recognisable for his food and for his 19-year-long TV career presenting *Through The Keyhole* and *Masterchef*. And, let’s be frank, for his voice, which has over the years provoked much mockery: “I’ve still got my *Spitting Image* head in my attic in case they want to put it on again,” he says, a shade wearily. But where exactly is that accent – “seau” for “so”, “gaught” for “got”, etc – from? Grossman smiles tightly. “A few people have identified it very clearly as Boston [Massachusetts, near where Grossman was born]. A particular Boston, which then got mangled through years of living in England. As for the mockery, I only find it annoying if it’s the only thing people want to talk about.”

There is, in fact, much else to talk about and Grossman talks wittily and well, with a nice line in anecdote. When, for instance, he first thought in 1995 of bringing a premium product to a field that was what they called “commoditised”, he had no idea what the food industry was like. “Within the industry, there are these very serious guys who are category buyers, who decide what’s going to appear on the shelves. And I had an interview with a buyer – the sauces and pickles buyer – of a major multiple. And he was very uninterested. He said, ‘So what’s different about your sauce?’ So I said, ‘Well, it’s very different because it’s made with crushed tomatoes and it doesn’t have any funny ingredients and it’s made as close as possible to home cooking, *etc.*’ And he said, ‘How much is it?’ And I said, ‘It’s going to be £1.29 for 350ml.’ And he went *ashen*. And then he leant over his desk and said to me, very menacingly, ‘If my wife spent more than 99p for 500ml, I’d kill her.’”

Still Grossman was sure he was on to a winner. Just as he’d locked on to a growing fascination with interiors when he cooked up *Through The Keyhole* with David Frost and Kevin Sim (they still own the format), so, too, was he sure that “people were travelling more and more – ordinary people were going to places like Thailand. And they were developing a taste for real flavour.”

The results bear him out. Today Loyd Grossman Sauces (which are manufactured and distributed by Premier Foods) has a turnover of “£65m, at retail”. The range continues to grow and what’s interesting is the way Grossman has managed, as one marketing analyst told me, “to be as credible in Thai and Indian food as he is in pasta sauces. He’s done what’s not impossible but very rare: it’s called ‘mass niche’. He’s created what’s seen as a premium brand but sells gazillions.”

So, is it true that he need never work again? “That *would* be nice,” he says. His sauces have bought him the freedom to pursue his “hobbies” – which include being engaged with the museums and conservation world. He’s a trustee of St Deiniol’s Library, near Hawarden, the only residential library in Britain (dinner, bed and breakfast costs from £25); has been involved in creating the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, which opened in August, and the new Museum of Liverpool, due to open in 2010; was a commissioner of English Heritage, and much more. Recently, he’s been appointed chairman of the Churches Conservation Trust. “Yeah, that’s a new gig,” he says, “and I’m still learning my way round. I like gigs where I know enough to get the gig but where I still have a lot to learn before I can really deliver.” His one miserable adventure in the public sector was the five years he spent trying to raise the quality of food in the NHS: “So depressing, so demoralising and so sad. I volunteered for five years and during that time I had six ministers. It was endlessly pushing the same rock up the same hill. We could not get the politicians to deliver.”

It’s a rare blip in a reasonably charmed life. “I’ve had no career. Everything that’s happened has happened by accident, because I like doing what I like doing,” he says. Born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, in 1950, Grossman went to private school in Canada before reading history at Boston University. His father had been a professional songwriter and “very good” jazz pianist. By the time Loyd arrived, he was an antiques dealer with a fine private collection. His mother’s family had been in hot dogs; his father’s forebears had been in the bottling business so “food was in my DNA”.

So was music, and Grossman played guitar from the age of 12. “I was lucky enough to start at a time when if you owned an electric guitar, it immediately got you in a band.” Grossman also wrote about music, for local magazines and for Rolling Stone, championing “prog rock” English bands such as ELP and the Nice; he admits to a glow of pleasure at the BBC’s quoting his laudatory review of Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon* in a programme celebrating the album’s 30th anniversary. He was also an aficionado of English glossy magazines, so when a college chum suggested he do a postgraduate degree in England, he was up for it.

In 1975 Grossman hit the LSE (of which he is now on the court of governors) and, in due course, the punk scene. He also started writing for Harper’s & Queen magazine. “The first thing they published was a piece about 1930s London Tube architecture. Very *recherché*, but the editor thought it was amusing.” A

job at the magazine followed, and the position of restaurant critic, which he held for 13 years. Nicholas Coleridge (now managing director of Condé Nast in Britain) was a colleague: “I saw him as a tremendous competitor when I first met him because we were vying for the same slots. Now, I’m of the unshakeable opinion that he’s terrific,” says Coleridge.

Any other memories of Loyd? “I once inherited a desk from him at work and in it I found a brown envelope which contained 12 photographs of Jet Bronx and the Forbidden, including one photograph of Loyd playing the guitar stark naked – a wonderful picture in which the guitar was being held strategically to conceal. I do remember he had very hairy legs.”

Grossman’s exhibitionist streak found another outlet in *Through The Keyhole*, a job he landed by mistake. TV-am were looking for new faces and someone told them about this guy with a silly name writing witty restaurant reviews for a glossy. So instead of Vogue’s Bevis Hillier, whom the tipster had meant, TV-am descended on Loyd. “But if that hadn’t happened,” says Grossman, “Bevis would not have been able to devote time to writing his magisterial biography of Betjeman. So I think I’ve done my bit for English literature.”

Now Grossman’s doing his bit for British music. He took up guitar again five years ago when his daughter Connie wanted to learn. (Grossman has two daughters, Connie, 15, and Florence, 18; he and his wife Debbie have parted.) Connie gave up but Grossman rediscovered his passion. Now he’s got five or so guitars, including a 1972 Fender Stratocaster and the much sought-after 1968 Goldtop. As “a jobbing guitarist” in the US, he once opened in front of 15,000 people. Now, though, he’s twitchy about playing in front of a crowd, let alone singing: “It’s so early in the process.” The last time he performed in public was on his pal Danny Baker’s show, four or five years ago: “I did a version of the Kinks’ ‘All Day and All of the Night’. One of my favourites.”

What’s he going to wear for his return to the stage?

“Something black.” He pauses and smiles. “Of course, in the ‘glory days’ I used to wear a black leather motorcycle jacket.”

So that’s what it will be?

Grossman looks up at the ceiling, smooth, sleek, immaculately turned out. He grins. “Possibly,” he says. “Possibly.”