



# BEING A POP STAR IS WEIRD. THERE'S NOT MUCH HANGING OFF A YACHT IN THE CARIBBEAN.



THE FOO FIGHTERS' FAVOURITE GUEST STAR IS IN REFLECTIVE MOOD AS HE RELEASES HIS 'BOOKEND' COMPILATION THE BEST OF ME. IN A REVEALING INTERVIEW HE TELLS US ABOUT HIS S.A.W. YEARS, FORGING HIS OWN WAY, THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY LIFE AND A HEAVY METAL ALTER EGO.

STEVE HARNELL

**R**ick Astley is having his Bob Dylan moment. Alongside their studio incarnations, his new greatest hits compilation *The Best Of Me* includes striking reinterpretations of his biggest moments. Fancy hearing *Never Gonna Give You Up* recast as a heart-wrenching piano forte ballad? *Together Forever* reworked as a late-night smoky jazz standard? Then step right this way...

While we're not in the realms of *Tangled Up In Blue* performed as a polka here, the 10

freshly recorded, 'reimagined' songs that feature on the comp's second disc are intriguing reboots some distance away from their 80s models. "Dylan has that thing where he just goes off on one on stage and even the musicians in his band don't know what he's up to until they get to a certain lyric or moment," Rick explains of His Bobness' liking for on-the-fly radical transformations of his back catalogue. "The one thing I've done with my new versions is that I sing the same melody, it's just that everything else is

different. The key, the tone of the whole thing, the structure is changed here and there."

The message is clear, though, the originals of those 80s hits sound very much of their time – Linn 9000 drum machine and all – but their structures and melodies are timeless.

"*The Best Of Me* is a bookend. Re-recording the songs has been a nice experience," adds Rick. "It's been enjoyable to revisit something from 32 years ago and just pretend I'm from a different universe and say, 'This is how I'd do it today'."

Rick Astley's new compilation *The Best Of Me* includes a whole host of reworkings of his biggest hits

Pete Waterman had a first listen to the album the other day and remarked that [the reimagined version] made him realise just what a good song *Together Forever* is," Astley adds.

**ROSÉ MEMORIES**

As we meet up at an elegant Maida Vale restaurant beside London's Grand Union Canal, Rick has just caught up with Waterman and the pair are still on good terms. There's obviously no hard feelings almost 30 years on after the singer decided to strike out on his own and leave the SAW empire that helped him sell 15 million copies of his debut album.

"SAW wrote some really, really great songs," Rick reflects, glass of rosé in hand. "They were produced in a way that puts them in a very exact moment in time. Even they wouldn't have produced those records 10 years later in the same way. They had a formula sound, but at the end of the day you can still sit down and strum them on guitar or play them on piano and they still work."

With SAW's vision of making a UK pop production line to rival Motown's success in the 60s and 70s, Astley was keenly aware that he'd have to fit into a straitjacket formula, despite being something of an anomaly on the label – he had an extraordinarily soulful voice that could rock you back on your heels. SAW's relentless workload impacted on Astley at first; he struggled to elbow his way to the front of the queue ahead of labelmates Kylie, Jason, Mel & Kim et al.

"SAW became massively busy around the time I signed with them and I got put on the back burner," Rick explains. "Initially, the idea was to make records and release them on the label they'd formed but the truth of it was they got a bit busy. SAW had a formula and were trying to create their own empire, their own legacy. They never got a drummer in, never got a bass player in. That became their sound. What I would say, though, is if you put on *Say I'm Your Number One* by Princess, *You Spin Me Round* by Dead Or Alive, Mel & Kim's *Respectable* and let's say *Venus* by Bananarama then yes, they do have an 80s feel to them, but you can't say all those records sound alike. Through the mists of time they probably seem a bit closer to each other but when I made tea for them they all sounded different to me. SAW found their real formula with people like me, Jason and Kylie a little bit later."

Yet Rick was always a man apart on the roster. He was a singer who became a pop star; the diametric opposite of Kylie and Jason, ready-made stars who gradually learned their craft as vocalists. Astley agrees: "Kylie and Jason came from an acting background and were already

**NEVER GONNA GIVE YOU UP**

**ANATOMY OF A CLASSIC**

"The strings are very Philly. Pete [Waterman] knew that I loved a lot of artists like Luther Vandross and Alexander O'Neal. Luther was beyond everybody, his voice was unbelievable," Rick explains. "I loved older artists like Al Green, Bill Withers and Shalamar. A lot of those records had that American production feel to it. There are things about *Never Gonna Give You Up* that give it an American vibe. I loved that Colonel Abrams record *Trapped*, by the way, that influences the bassline, although I'm not sure SAW knew that I admired it at the time.

"I've always felt happy about the song. There was a time in my life where I may have thought, 'Oh, for God's sake! I have made other songs, you know', even SAW tracks, but I count myself lucky. It's hard sometimes if the first song you do is the biggest one you'll ever have. That can be hard to swallow but it's also such a door opener. It didn't really stop for a couple of years."

very famous before they made their records, it's a totally different angle. Having said that, there's a bit of an actor in every singer. Like Frank Sinatra said, when he read the lyrics, he had to really get into it: feel it, believe it. For me, that's acting."

Rick adds that his best work comes from when he connects with it on an emotional level, although some songs are destined for classic status no matter what.

"*Never Gonna Give You Up*, for example, is a great song and there are a lot of people who could have sung that and it would have been a hit. Whether it would have been the hit it became if it wasn't a combination of SAW's writing, production, my voice, and the way I looked – ie 12 years old – I couldn't say. All those things came together perfectly."

The initial success of *Never Gonna Give You Up* came amid a whirlwind of intrigue surrounding Astley's identity. Surely he was a record company ringer and the real vocalist was an unknown black R&B singer from Detroit rather than a freckle-faced youngster from Lancashire...

"I'm from Newton-le-Willows for God's sake! Yes, there was that controversy," Rick laughs as he sips on another glass of rosé.

"We only made the video for *Never Gonna Give You Up* in the



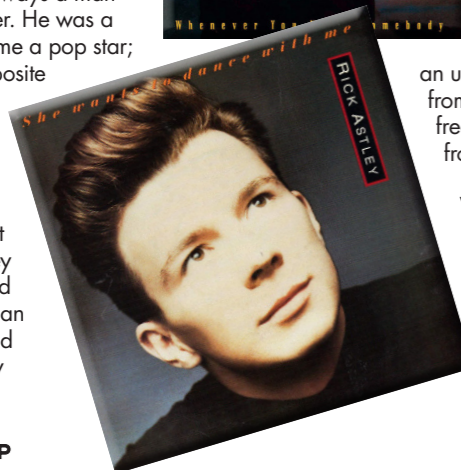
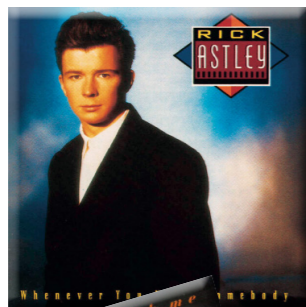
week it went to No.1. It had been on the radio and we'd been on *Top Of The Pops* once or twice but we didn't have a video. MTV was in its prime and if you didn't have a video you didn't exist. Why didn't [the record label] do it? I wonder if somebody was saying, 'Let's just hang on with a video for a bit. Let people discover what he looks like rather than ram it down their throats...'

"I'm not the ugliest person in the world but we were in a period in the 80s where pop stars looked amazing and I didn't really tick that box. If we look through the whole life of music, it's not just about the voice. There have been plenty of artists with not much of a voice who've got quite big careers out of it!"

**THE WORLD IS MINE**

Astley's success was astonishing. Debut album *Whenever You Need Somebody* was a worldwide hit shifting 15 million copies. From the release of that first LP to its fifth single *It Would Take A Strong Strong Man*, Rick was the biggest-selling artist in the world, bar none. But the SAW songwriting stranglehold was broken within a year, and Rick's game-changing, self-penned *She Wants To Dance With Me* altered the dynamic when Pete Waterman selected it as his next single. The penny dropped – for all concerned – Astley could survive on his own.

"As I remember it, I wrote that song because Pete loved *I Wanna Dance With Somebody* by Whitney Houston. The guys used to listen to a lot of American records and analyse their groove. I thought I'd do my version of the Whitney song. Without



**S.A.W. HAD A FORMULA AND THEY WERE TRYING TO CREATE THEIR OWN EMPIRE, THEIR OWN LEGACY**



really putting his brain into gear, I think Pete just sorta went, 'I love it! That's your next single!' Then he went off around the building screaming, 'Rick's written his next single!' – with me having never written one at this point, just a few album tracks. Meanwhile, my management pointed out that everyone needed to focus on making sure the next single would be suitable for America. Bananarama were already known but a lot of the newer SAW artists never got a look-in in the States and that frightened the shit out of me.

"It led to some issues, though, because Matt [Aitken] and Mike [Stock] said, 'Hang on a minute, we write the songs.' I wasn't the one jumping up and down demanding it be the single although I was hopeful I'd write a single one day. Pete had a different axe to grind as he was my publisher. He had an overview that Mike and Matt didn't as Pete was running the whole empire. Maybe he was thinking if I turned out a hundredth of what Marvin Gaye did, ie an artist that you sign becomes able to write his own songs, it might not be a bad thing.

"At first, it wasn't gonna be my next single. I actually sang a version of *Nothing Can Divide Us*. I didn't want to be an upstart, but I realised I didn't think that should be the first single off my album in America. I wasn't just totally bothered about America but I knew that it was a game-changer. I was being offered Coca-Cola commercials because I'd had two No.1s. We didn't do it in the end, it's a long story, but we won't get into that. I'll need something stronger for that one..."

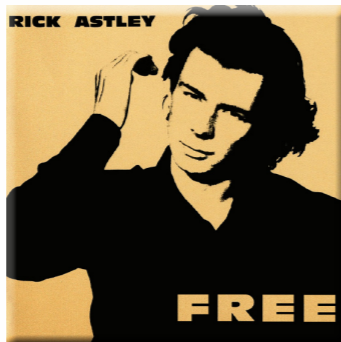
**FREE AS A BIRD**

Rick's third album – the pertinently-titled *Free* – marked a new chapter. A defiant statement that he was a mature artist willing to step off the SAW conveyor belt even if it dented his chances in the charts.

**A LOT OF THE NEWER S.A.W. ARTISTS NEVER GOT A LOOK-IN IN THE STATES AND THAT FRIGHTENED THE SHIT OUT OF ME**

"I was more part of the process on those SAW records than people were conscious of – I wrote four songs on the first album and four on the second – but for the likes of *Never Gonna Give You Up*, *Together Forever* and *Whenever You Need Somebody*, SAW wrote all three of those tracks and I just turned up and sang. I didn't have any part to play in those other than making tea on the sessions.

"If we were having No.1 after No.1 I might have stayed with SAW a bit longer but I just looked at it and thought, 'I don't know how many records I'll make and we're not going to repeat *Never Gonna Give You Up*.' I still think that's the best song they ever wrote. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be great to go and work in different studios with different



musicians, real strings, real drummers, a brass section.' Elton John's gonna come in and play grand piano for me! If I'd said to Pete, 'I've written this song. I want to get Sting's drummer on it and a choir', he would have dropped his tea!

"SAW were on their journey and I'd gone as far as I could with them. They weren't mugs and weren't daft. They knew how to write a hit that worked well on the radio.

"I understood that we may not have that [original] success again, but I was alright with it. I was brutally honest with myself and realised I was a pop singer who might not make another 25 albums.

"Being in a studio where you've got Quincy Jones' string arranger, Jerry Hey, those were the boxes I wanted to tick. I wanted to be in LA working with the guy who did the strings for Quincy and Michael Jackson. I wanted to be on the other side of the glass when the choir fired off and sang the choral bits on *Cry For Help*. I'll remember that until my dying day. Moments like that, you can't replace them."

*Free* did the kind of numbers that Astley could reasonably expect; a Top 10 hit in the UK and Top 40 in the US. A step down, perhaps, from his SAW pomp but, on his own terms, a decent result.

But by fourth album *Body & Soul*, Rick's heart wasn't in it anymore. The grind of promoting his music around the world had worn thin. Without the oxygen of publicity surrounding it, the record virtually sank without trace and, at the age of just 27, Rick did the unthinkable – he retired from the game to spend more time with his family.

"Being a pop star is weird. In reality, most of the things pop stars do are not very pop star-like. There's not much hanging off a yacht in the Caribbean, it's more often than not chatting to journalists on a speakerphone in an office with no windows. There are the moments why we all do it, such as performing on stage which is incredible, you also get to meet some really interesting people and visit some funky places. But a lot of it is like being a travelling salesman. There's nothing wrong with that, but when you thought you were signing up to be a pop star, you know... it becomes very detached from the actual music."

**FATHER FIGURE**

While he was already financially secure, it's admirable Rick had the resolve to give up his career with so many years still ahead of him. And that decision may have been in part at least driven by his own troubled upbringing in a broken home. Forget money, it's family that's important...

"It wasn't just because of my daughter Emilie. I don't want her

**METAL GURU**

**RICK ASTLEY'S ROCK ALTER EGO**

"I have two friends and we're in a punky mid-life crisis rock band called The Luddites. One of the guys in it, Simon, is a best friend of mine. We got hammered one night and created this track. So we formed a splinter group and called ourselves Kunsthaus, which is 'Art House' in German, but you know, said a certain way..."

"The track sounded like Rammstein – well it sounded like Rammstein to us, in our heads anyway and it's called *Paint Is My World* (Father Ich In Veld). We did that then kinda forgot about it but when when we played Germany on tour, Simon came out for a few nights. I told him: 'We're gonna have to play *Paint Is My World* tonight in Berlin.' I got the band to learn it that afternoon, then on stage I found this cardboard box to put on my head. In Denmark, we did it with a bin lid on my head. It was funny as hell, the audience loved it.

"When you're a kid and you start making music you're doing it for the love of it, you might hope to be the next David Bowie, but you're doing it from a complete joy point of view. It's a bit like if you have a kick around with your mates, you don't necessarily think you'll end up playing for Chelsea or Man Utd but you still want to do it. That joy can be lost in the professionalism. We're still keeping it fun."

Off the back of 'Rickrolling', Rick was voted Best Act Ever at the 2008 MTV Europe Music Awards

© Peter Neill



I DID THAT ALBUM 50 FOR MYSELF AND A FEW DEDICATED FANS, IT JUST GREW INTO SOMETHING ELSE ENTIRELY

thinking I gave up my career for solely for that reason but it was a part of it. I just wanted to do normal things and be there for her. I was a bit 'over it' [the music business] and sick of it all. I have more peaks and 'up' bits now than I did back then when I was having more success." Astley's childhood was affected by his parents' bitter divorce; his decision to spend more time with his new family therefore came from a well-informed notion of how important a stable domestic life was to his happiness.

"There's a bit of consciousness in that from me and probably underlying emotions of having divorced parents who didn't speak to each other, let alone live in the same house. I grew up in an atmosphere that was a broken situation. I was only four or five when it happened but I spent most of my

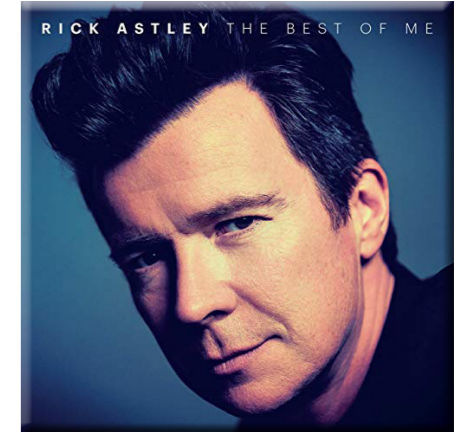
childhood in a pretty shitty environment. I'm grateful for my brothers and sisters who were amazing, but in terms of a family unit, I grew up in one that was a bit crap. In the modern times we live in today more people

manage to split up and be civil, even if it's just for the sake of the kids. Basically, my mum and dad were just broken. They had a son who died before I was born. They had two sons after he died, but I think they were just broken and couldn't admit it. That original tragedy is an immensely tough thing to go through. I don't know how they survived it, to be honest.

"My two brothers, my sister and me are all with the partners we've been with since we were pretty young, so maybe there's a subconscious sense of, 'You know what, we're gonna make sure this is gonna stick.'"

"The Wilderness Years" – as Rick doesn't call them – at first looked like they'd see him become a songwriter or producer for hire. But changes in music culture saw it pan out differently. Save for co-writes with former Marillion frontman Fish (*Mission Statement*) and *Popstars: The Rivals* winners One True Voice on Shakespeare's (*Way With Words*), Astley remained mostly silent.

"I had a studio built and pursued it for a while but I don't think I had the chops for it. The 90s brought in this whole Auto-Tune thing. Dance music became massive. There were loads of pop songs obviously but it was a bad time to get involved in learning how to make records and producing vocals. Managers and labels were happy to sign people who couldn't really sing, because



they could fix everything with Auto-Tune. Thankfully, we've grown out of it a little now. There are some amazing singers now in proper pop music, the young kids who have been coming through in the last 15 years. Look at Adele, Sam Smith, Lewis Capaldi – people who could stand up in a pub and make people take notice or sing on a great record and have a worldwide hit. That to me is still a path that's important."

#### BACK FOR GOOD

Rick's gradual re-emergence saw him tiptoe his way back into the music biz with the Germany-only release of 2001's *Keep It Turned On* alongside regular touring. But it was the Rickrolling phenomenon of 2007 and No.1 success of comeback album *50* where the stakes were really raised. If it wasn't for those, perhaps Astley would have been content to see out the rest of his days with cameo appearances on retro package tours.

"I think there's an element with some people – and I definitely fitted into that category – of saying, 'You had a great go at it, you've been really lucky and can still go out and play your old tunes but the truth is you're never going to have another hit record again.' If you want to make an album in your garage and put it on the internet, you're allowed to do that. You're not going to have a record outside your 20 immediate friends that anyone's going to know about. You have to be comfortable with that or else you drive yourself fucking mad. So that's what I did. I did that album *50* purely for myself and a few dedicated fans around the world who kept up with me. I just thought, you know what, there's something on the internet, you don't have to buy it but it's there. It's what I'm capable of at this point in my life. I've played every instrument on it, I've written everything. It's just a love letter. It's where I'm at right now, that's it. It just grew into something else."

As we wind our chat up an ITN news crew give Rick's PR guru a call and we grab an Uber to dash over to the singer's record company for an interview to be broadcast the following day on the nightly bulletin. His third act renaissance shows no signs of slowing down and he's as newsworthy as ever. *The Best Of Me* may be a bookend, but don't bet against any number of further chapters. ■

● *The Best Of Me* is out now on BMG. Rick Astley tours the UK from 3 April 2020. For tickets, visit [rickastley.co.uk](http://rickastley.co.uk)

## FOR THOSE ABOUT TO RICK... WE SALUTE YOU

He may be known for his R&B-influenced work, but Rick loves hard rock as well as soul greats. We asked him to pick out his essential selection of five must-have albums.



#### 01 AC/DC HIGHWAY TO HELL (1979)

"I learnt to play drums to that. I happened to mention this to Dave Grohl on the first night I met him. One of his daughters is doing exactly the same thing – she's learning drums to it, too."

#### 02 AL GREEN GREATEST HITS (1975)

"I'm one of those Philistines that very often puts on a greatest hits record. I love listening to proper albums all the way through but when I'm in the kitchen and have just opened a bottle of red wine, I just want to hear my Al Green favourites."

#### 03 BILL WITHERS LIVE AT CARNEGIE HALL (1973)

"Richard Drummie from *Go West* gave me this. It sounds amazing and Bill talks a lot between songs. He explains what his grandma really meant to him when he's about to play *Grandma's Hands*. It sends a shiver down my spine. He's amazing, one of the most underrated songwriters of all time – his songs are everywhere."

#### 04 BIFFY CLYRO ONLY REVOLUTIONS (2009)

"I knew who the band were, but wasn't too aware of their music until my godson's family introduced me to it. They kept on about Biffy Clyro, then I heard *Many Of Horror* on the radio and was completely blown away. It literally floored me, I pulled the car over and had a little tear in my eye. I went home and downloaded the album and listened to that song 20 times in a row. The rest of *Only Revolutions* was so unlike the single but the album is mega."

#### 05 FOO FIGHTERS CONCRETE AND GOLD (2017)

"Having met the band and being invited to sing with him it feels a bit weird to choose this. It's like, 'Oh you've got into the Foo Fighters have you?!' I've liked them for a long time, I've just happened to meet them. All their records are phenomenal, but one of my favourites is *Concrete And Gold*, their last album. It's a real departure. It's still them but you can hear the fact that they're all in love with The Beatles. The producer Greg Kurstin has worked with proper pop artists and it's kinda funky that the Foes have said to themselves, 'We shouldn't be afraid of opening up a window and putting our heads through it'. I'm a bit of a closet rocker really."