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The Big Dish - Swimmer. Scotland's favourite albums, by Billy Sloan

By Billy Sloan

STEVEN Lindsay paints pictures for a living. Since 2011, the tools of his trade have been brushes and oils. But he is better known for the rich colours and textures created by the lyrics and melodies of his earlier work.

It's 35 years since Lindsay completed the songs for Swimmer, the impressive debut album by his band, The Big Dish.

At 22 years of age, the singer was already viewing his entry into the UK music industry with a definite artistic eye.

"After signing a deal with Virgin, we were in the studio for nearly 18 months – with three different producers – before I felt we had the makings of a really good record," Steven recalled.

"I was thinking, am I ever going to get this album finished and have something to show for all the hard work?" But I never panicked. I always said, it just HAS to sound convincing. And, like anything you do in art, it had to stand up on its own."

Swimmer did just that. The album was released to encouraging reviews and widespread radio play. The band, formed in Airdrie in 1983, were an early nucleus of Lindsay, guitarist Mark Ryce and keyboard player John Harper. Soon, they were rubbing shoulders with contemporary Scottish acts like Lloyd Cole And The Commotions, Del Amitri and Love And Money.

"We recorded our first demo at Berkeley Street in Glasgow, when it was still just an 8-track studio," he said. "The songs were Big New Beginning, Prospect Street – our first two singles – and Swimmer.

"The tape attracted interest from Virgin. I remember walking up Ladbrooke Grove in London and seeing Kensal House – the big white building which was their HQ – and thinking ... I'm on the same label as the Sex Pistols, XTC, Magazine, Simple Minds and a whole list of bands that I loved. It felt fantastic. Mark and John were very important to the band getting signed. Although they didn't go the distance I owe them a lot."

Lindsay was booked into The Garden studio in London, owned by John Foxx of Ultravox, to work with producer Paul Hardiman.

"Virgin were very patient in that they gave me some time to write," revealed Steven. "I'd loved the Commotions' 1984 debut album, Rattlesnakes, and the sound Paul got on that record. We recorded four tracks with him but began to realise we were a very different kind of band. I thought, is this really the best avenue for us to go down? I think Paul was also a little bit unsure if we were the right fit. So we left it at that."

Virgin recruited Glyn Johns, whose studio credits included The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and The Who.

"Their attitude seemed to be that as I was so young maybe I needed a safer pair of hands. Somebody a bit more old school," he said. The band worked at Johns' farmhouse studio in west Sussex, recording with Andy Fairweather Low on bass and Henry Spinetti, who had played drums with Eric Clapton and Paul McCartney. "While it was a great experience being with guys of that calibre, it still wasn't right," admitted Steven. "I'm sure Virgin were thinking, what the hell they were going to do with me?"

The solution was much closer to home. Ian Ritchie, who'd been brought up in Glasgow, played saxophone with art-pop band Deaf School before moving into production. One of his early claims to fame was the sax solo on the 1983 Wham! hit, Club Tropicana.

He'd later produce albums for Roger Waters, Laurie Anderson, Hugh Cornwell and also collaborate with Gary Numan.

"Ian was a lot more into technology – using a Synclavier and stuff like that – so we just clicked. It seemed a much better direction to go in," recalled Steven.

"We hired an old grain wharf in Wapping and chucked in loads of equipment so we could start working on the songs."

When they moved across the capital to The Townhouse studio, guitarist Brian McFie and bass player Raymond Docherty were drafted in to help complete the album. "Ian produced most of Swimmer but I did use a few tracks by Paul and Glyn," said Steven. In 1985, Big New Beginning was released as the first single, closely followed by Prospect Street. While the tracks garnered good radio play, they unfortunately failed to crack the Top 40.

But both singles fired up interest in the forthcoming album. It was a similar story with Slide – which reached No 86 – and Christina's World, which climbed two places higher.

"I never had any set idea that the album should be this or that," revealed Steven. "In those days, you were hoping for hit singles too, so there was a bit of pressure on us. It was in the back of my mind. But in retrospect, maybe I paid too much attention to all that. It was best when you were just developing or evolving rather than thinking, I NEED to write something – anything – that's going to get us into the charts.

"The singles failed to find the target, but they more than did their job.

"There were enough people who seemed to be into what we were doing."

He added: "In 2006, when I released my first solo album, Exit Music, I did an interview with Simon Mayo on Radio 2.

"He was a massive Big Dish fan and said: 'You were always really unlucky. It never seemed to bother you that you didn't get a hit single'. He was more annoyed about it than I was. But Virgin couldn't have been too bothered. They let us make another album."

The key songs on Swimmer were inspired by Steven's family and his enduring love of art. "Big New Beginning was about immigration. When I was 10 years old I remember my uncle moving to America," he said. "He went over on his own with the idea that as soon as he'd made enough money he'd send tickets for my aunt and cousins to join him. I wondered what it must have been like for a man from Airdrie to go over to New York and make a new life. So I was singing about his big new beginning.

"Christina's World was named after Christina Olson, who was the subject of a painting by Andrew Wyeth, the American artist. I was obsessed by her, so I wrote the song around it, to incorporate what I thought she might be thinking.

"Prospect Street was based on an Edward Hopper painting."

But the haunting title song remains the album's standout track. "The demo for Swimmer had a much lighter feel

to it, more like very early Simple Minds,” revealed Steven. “Ian and I came up with this heavy beat which totally changed the song. It was exactly what we needed.

“But it didn’t take away from the melancholy side of the chorus. When we recorded it, life in Britain was very political. You had to have a cause to sing about. Everybody had one. I decided to go the other way and write a song about treading water and sitting on the fence. And how there was nothing wrong with saying ... you don’t know.”

Swimmer put down a creative marker for a second album, *Creeping Up On Jesus*, also on Virgin, in 1988. Three years later, the band moved to East-West Records and made their final album, *Satellites*. It peaked at No. 43 and produced the Top 40 hit, *Miss America*. A few months later, they split.

“I think the band had run its course. We’d done everything we’d set out to do,” said Steven. “I just felt there had to be a change. The time was right to go off and do something on my own.”

THE Billy Sloan Show is on BBC Radio Scotland every Saturday at 10pm.