



Frivian Stanshall — clutching "Old Scrotum, the wrinkled retainers" — at home in Muswell Hill, surrounded by his beloved assortment of home-made instruments, paintings and sculpture. Last exploits include the Lonzos' cameo in the magical Mystery Tour movie: "If we'd been included on the album I wouldn't be in a bedsit now."

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# Time For Tiffin?

The faint aroma of an Eastern beverage wafts through a Muswell Hill bedsit. There's talk of crumpets. And, later, you will discover the fate of Vivian Stanshall, eccentric and gifted leader of the Bonzo Dog Band, cracked author of the Sir Henry sagas, liver of life in extremes. "I always crave exactly what is bad for me," he tells Tom Hibbert.

A cup of char, old bean?" enquires a voice that's plummy and fruity, rich in Olde Englishe (circa 1930s) charm. The libation-profferer is a gentleman in his middle forties; he has ginger whiskers and a gleaming pate, and is clothed in the trappings of English eccentricity: red shoes, garish dressing gown and a cravat - creation festooned with polka dots and orangery. He puffs upon a cigarillo as he tempts you with the many fine and exotic blends of tea at his disposal. He is the kind of cove, one thinks, who should be tugging languidly upon a fraying bell-cord to summon an ancient and devoted manservant to toast muffins at the hearth of some vast and dilapidated country pile. He seems, at first sight and sound, like some anomalous Wodehousian relic, untouched by time as he proposes "a cup of char, old bean?" with no hint of irony in the endearment.

But this is no Blandings Castle. It's a tiny bedsit in Muswell Hill - room enough for two chairs, bed, old gas cooker and little else. However, the tenant of these humble quarters, Vivian Stanshall (for it is he), has made them his own. The walls are lined with his paintings, carvings and art creations. On shelves there are pieces of his pottery - ashtrays (littered with the browning butts of roll-ups) in the form of clasped hands. Strange musical instruments abound: there's a mandolin that "I made with sad eyes and a moustache just like mine"; there's an original Fender Mustang, its body covered with painted childlike creatures of Stanshall's imagining; there are brass oddities and ethnic-looking stringed things that only the master knows how to play. On

the floor sits a log that Stanshall has carved into some repugnant totem. He calls it Old Scrotum the "wrinkled old retainer" of his Sir Henry yams. The ginger old gentleman casts an eye across his gallery. "I'd be much healthier if I'd stuck to painting. I would have to mix with awful people. But at least I'd be sane." The kettle is boiling for our caps of "char" and there is a roar of the fruitiest laughter. "Haw haw haw," it goes. "Don't I sound most frightfully pompous, old bean?"



The Bonzo Dog Band '69 - (top, from left) Rodney Desborough Slater, Stanshall, "Legs" Larry Smith, (bottom) Dennis Cowan, Roger Ruskin-Spear, Neil Innes: anarchy, surrealism, general jollity, parody, Goon Show-styled non-sequitur mayhem and a smattering of light "auto-destruction"...



Chris Taylor

Vivian Stanshall Archive

Vivian Stanhall was an art student when it all happened. It was the early '60s; he was at the Central School Of Art and his flat mate, Rodney Slater, was at St. Martin's. Slater had a sizable collection of musical instruments to blow down - clarinets and tubas and Sousaphones and the like - and Stanhall, in idle moments, found that he "could get noises out of these instruments", so Rodney asked him to come down to St. Martin's and join in a loose collection of students who, impervious to the delights of beat music, took great pleasure in performing excruciating, but would-be serious versions of jazz and popular music tunes of the '20s and '30s. "Rod and I sat around tearing up pieces of paper to come up with chance names. The Army Surplus Stuntmen was one and The Invented Window Smelters and then we came up with The Bonzo Dog Dada Band and because we both liked to study drawings, that was it. . ."

The Bonzo Dog Dada Band was a collection of "iconoclastic, neo-Dadaist, almost-musicians from various London art schools" who were wont to take the trad-jazz clowning of The Temperance Seven and The New Vaudeville Band - the "comedy" groups of the day - a little further, into anarchy and surrealism, general jollity, parody, Goon Show-styled non-sequitur mayhem, and a smattering of light "auto-destruction". "Madcap" entertainment ...

"It was very often that we had a dozen banjo players and maybe one sousaphone player and me singing. We played boozers mid knees-ups at art schools and people kept leaving saying, Bugger this, I'm a painter, I'm a serious artist. So, eventually, it came down to about seven people ..."

Vivian Stanhall, Neil Innes, Roger Ruskin-Spear, Rodney Desborough Slater, "Legs" Larry Smith, Vernon Dudley Bohay-Nowell, Sam Spoons. The group became quite a bit at the Bird In Hand hostelry in Forest Hill and at the Blue Angel club in Berkeley Square (the music was good for guards officers to be sick over Fergie-types to) and one Easter holidays, the manager of the Blue Angel asked them whether they'd care to go on a tour of Northern clubs. "I loved it. Performing, to me, was like translating a drawing or a print or a painting into a palpable, three-dimensional and transient thing, something that was as brief as a rose or a fart. That was wonderful for me. Tremendous juice, I craved it. I always crave exactly what is bad for me ... And how those audiences ever made head or tail of people tearing up telephone directories and singing shopping lists, I really don't know. . ."

In 1966, through some quirk of fate which Vivian Stanhall has entirely forgotten, the ensemble - now calling themselves The Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band as "Dada" seemed a little too snooty and pretentious (while—Doo-Dah" was scion dropped for being too silly) - acquired a slender recording contract with EMI Parlophone and recorded a pair of singles: My Brother Makes The Noises For The Talkies (c/w I'm Gonna Bring A Watermelon To My Gal Tonight) and Alley Oop (c/w Button Up Your Overcoat). The sessions were done at Abbey Road while The Beatles were in an adjoining studio recording

Revolver. (Neil Innes later tells me:—I felt such a fraud doing all this silly stuff when I could hear George (Harrison) in the next room going, I want to teeceell yeeoow, and twanging his sitars and being all cerebral. . .")

"Ringo's drum kit," Stanhall fondly recalls, "was heavily draped and nailed down so that people wouldn't discover the 'secret' of the way he miked it" Stanhall roars with fruity laughter. "So Larry went and put some meat in Ringo's kit. He slapped some meat in Ringo's drums to foil 'the Fabs' sound, haw haw haw. Larry used to drape himself in meat - offal and lungs and things. He particularly liked to wear meat in sweaty, hot clubs like The Marquee. It was something to do with the human condition. . ."

Those first two Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah singles were altogether ignored by the general public. But soon after signing a new contract with Liberty and releasing their first LP, Gorilla, in October 1967, the group were to find themselves favourites on the college circuit. Viv Stanhall would do his bits as Noel Coward figure gone wrong and something slightly unsavoury left over from the rule of the Raj while booming out esoteric, expressionist nonsense through a megaphone, "Legs" Larry Smith would come out from behind his drum kit to engage himself in bouts of cheesy Mr Entertainment-styled tap-dancing, Roger Ruskin-Spear's collection of stupid contraptions - hopeless robots and daft quasi-electrical devices - would whistle and explode ... This theatre of the absurd linked with songs (written almost exclusively by Stanhall and Innes, separately or in collaboration) that were witty or riotous or completely stupid-pastiches of 'ween-Wars popular fare, Vegas schmaltz, blues, psychedelia ... anything, really, to provide a welcome respite from the self-conscious seriousness of that era's rock "scene".

A major attraction for student would-be wags, the Bonzo Dog Band (from whom Nowell and Spoons had been ejected rapidly after the first LP) toured profusely throughout the late '60s. Stanhall, who has not performed on stage in more than a decade, seems to miss "the road". "Going up and down in the van," he says, "had a sort of mantric quality. Although we all groaned when we had to go to Newcastle, there was something about feeling like a sardine tin from your mouth to your rectum and feeling cold and actually looking forward to the filth of the Blue Boar that was poetic and wonderful. And then we got on stage and it was like a family bickering. If anyone was being pompous, then someone would start playing Dolly Gray or something extremely loud and interfering. Very often someone in the band would start playing something else simply because they were browned off. It all had some gestural abstractive logic to it."

Christmas 1968, The Bonzo Dog Band, alternative student favourites, became pop stars (for an instant) when their single I'm The Urban Spaceman went into the British Top 10. The record was produced by Paul McCartney.

"We were big faves with The Fabs,- says Stanhall,—to the extent that George wrote, in that huge book that cost a million quid with



The original band - when they were called The Bonzo Dog Dada Band - in '65 (from left) Sam Spoons, Spear, Stanhall, Leon Williams, Slater, Vernon Dudley Bohay-Nowell, Innes, Sidney Nichol, "Legs".

leather binding and tremendous tooling, that the Bonzos and The Beatles should have teamed up and then gone on in some sort of insane way. We were in the Magical Mystery Tour film (a brief "zany" cameo from the band) and I deeply regret that we weren't included on the Magical Mystery Tour album because I certainly wouldn't be in a bedsit now. But, anyway, after that I just phoned Paul up and asked him if he would produce this record and he said Yes, OK. And, to my utter chagrin, he played ukelele on it because he said I didn't cut it. I was deeply pissed off about that. The bloody sauce! ... Hated the record. Still do."

The Bonzo Dog Band made their final appearance in Much 1970. There was a last (fifth) LP, Let's Make Up And Be Friendly, released in early 1972, but this was just a contractual obligation and, says Stanhall, "a fiasco". Their whole career had been, in financial terms, a fiasco, according to Stanhall: "Our total royalty for the whole of our recording career was £26.42. That was the whole lot. We'd been very green and we'd signed a deal that gave us - I've got to get this right, it's so complicated - one sixth of 35 per cent of one per cent of 90 per cent. The stupidity! I'll say it again: one sixth of 35 per cent of one per cent of 90 per cent. The bloody sauce! So we weren't exactly swimming in the stuff. Do you know, old bean, if we had been properly exploited, I think we could have been hugely rich and hugely successful and I wouldn't have had so many nervous breakdowns. Though I'd probably have immediately drunk the profits away with Keith Moon, haw haw haw. . ."

It wasn't fiscal matters that rent the Bonzo Band asunder. It was the insecurity and uncertainty of their moving force, Vivian Stanhall. "I used to watch our chums from other English bands pontificating from the stage to people at a most impressionable age, and I knew damn well that they went from aeroplane to limo to hotel to limo to stage and knew absolutely bugger all what was going on in the world. And I no longer knew what was going on in the world. I hadn't been to an art exhibition in ages. There was nothing I could justifiably or honourably talk about - so I suggested that the band had a trial separation. Also, I was doing all the managing and all the publicity and all the interviews and I spent no time with my plants and I was becoming damned ill. So it all fell apart."

Whatever happened to the Bonzo Dog Band? Neil Innes became a Monty Python acolyte, a Rutle, a composer for Python offshoot feature films. This much we know.

But what of the others? Vivian Stanshall himself seems uncertain. "I see Rodney Slater quite a lot. He's got a band and they play in a hotel and he flops around here with a disgusting bag of organic vegetables and i whip out the banjo and we rasp away at some old favourites like Levi's Monkey Mike. And i speak to neil now and then – we tried to record together last April but it was *not* very successful. And apart from that, I don't see anyone much at all. I don't know what Larry's up to. I think Roger's teaching. Dennis (*Dennis Cowan who joined the group for their third LP, Tadpoles, and stayed to the bitter end*), well, Dennis is dead. And that's it, isn't it? Is there anyone else?"

Sam Spoons? "I imagine he's playing with the detestable Bob Kerr's Whoopie band (London pub circuit regulars). Bob Kerr swiped the entirety of our act and took it off to Las Vegas and made himself a great deal of money. But I'm used to being pillaged. It doesn't concern me because I'm safe in the knowledge that I can make up stuff that all the people who steal off me obviously can't. And these days I only want to be in competition with myself..."

Whatever happened to the Bonzo Dog Band? "We didn't split up because of . . ." says Vivian Stanshall, and pauses because the latest in a series of roll-ups he's been fashioning has fallen apart in his lap. He resumes: "There weren't any musical differences or any of that ... Actually, to be honest, there were a few sneaking niggles of a musical difference nature because I wanted to do something that was far more theatrical. Which I *did*. I went into a loony bin, haw haw haw!"

It was just weeks after the break-up of the Bonzo Dog Band that Vivian Stanshall suffered the first of several nervous breakdowns. "I had my first major anxiety attack, and that was that really. That put an end, effectively, to my performing career. I followed Spike Milligan into the funny bin. He'd just left and the woman there said at lunchtime, There's plenty of spinach, do you like greens? and I said, Yes, I like greens, and she said, Oh, dear, Mr *Milligan* didn't like greens. I could see the treatment they had mapped out like a road for my recovery: People Who Are Off Centre Don't Like Greens was the first rule and I had foiled it. I was *doomed*, old bean!"

Out of the "bin" and into the '70s, Vivian Stanshall formed a selection of half-hearted and half-baked bands – Freaks, Big Grunt, the Human Beans, Gerry Atric and his Aging Orchestra, Viv and his Gargantuan Chums – which "were over so quick they were subliminal, really." Much of the early part of the decade he spent hanging out with his chum Keith Moon, getting addled and sozzled. The career "loon" and the professional "eccentric" as one, getting regularly and heavily sloshed. "Moon and I getting plastered together was a very good idea, actually," says Stanshall, "because I didn't feel quite so alone. He wasn't a nutter, you know. He was just unable to express himself - he was a walking asterisk, an octopus of energy, and for

about four years we were living inside each other's pockets, boozing and then recovering in sauna baths. The only difference between us was that I thought I was going to go at 37, when Van Gogh and a lot of other painters went, and he was convinced he wouldn't make it past 30. He was almost right and I was wrong. But both of us suffered from the feeling that we had to perform and live up to an image all the time – Moonie moreso than me – and it was dreadful, really, because it means you never get to know anyone. People are *expecting* you to perform. And so you don't want to but you *perform*...."

Stanshall made few major contributions to popular art during this period, though he did take the role of "announcer" – the buoyant voice going Guitars! Bells! and so forth - on Mike Oldfield's hugely successful Tubular Bells. Even that is a sour, memory, it would seem: "All I remember about that is not being paid for it. It was just done on a nodding understanding that if anything happened. . ."

Vivian Stanshall does not remember an awful lot else about the 1970s. "I was taking so many tranquillisers I wasn't really there. I was absolutely anaesthetised with tranquillisers, augmented with drink. I was taking as many as 300 tranquillisers a day - and that would fell an office building. So when I started making a recovery from it all, which wasn't until 1986, it was as though 10 years and more had been edited out of my life. It still comes as a shock looking in the mirror and seeing this bald old coot looking back at me. I don't *feel* like that bald old coot at *all*, old bean. So it's always quite a surprise when I peruse the looking glass. It's as though it's someone else I'm inhabiting. . ."

Stanshall went through all those years in a Valium fog. He went through two divorces. Still he was able to invent the character of Rawlinson End's Sir Henry – P.G. Wodehouse going on James Joyce with a sprinkling of Burroughs for bad measure. "The idea for Sir Henry started from reading magazines in doctors' waiting rooms. Those magazines with stories that start with The Story So Far: Maureen has just had her leg off and Ralph has put a rice pudding in the oven – can he cope? Now read on ... I never wanted to get past 'Now read on . . .' I thought it was so heavy and pregnant and exciting when you got to the dot dot dot. So I just started writing my own rubbish and I released many of the warring voices that I had in me."

Sir Henry was to appear on record, on radio (courtesy of John Peel), and even on full-length feature film (Sir Henry portrayed by Trevor Howard in one of his last screen roles). Stanshall intended the film to be "a surreal Ealing comedy", and that's the way it turned out to be – though its creator was less than happy with the results. I just wasn't well enough to do it and when it came out I tried to stab the director with a penknife. But since it took me such a long time to open the damned thing, my wife noticed and stopped me. I went back into a loony bin after that ...

"All of my behaviour and judgements of recent years have been governed by my massive intake of tranquillisers," says Stanshall, no longer seeming the gamesome country squire, so glum and

*sotto voce* he's become. "Until I went to a clinic in Weston-Super-Mare in 1986 and was told for the first time what was happening to my body and found I could go for longer and longer periods without my drug, I could not juxtapose and synthesise thoughts. Even now I sometimes have great difficulty expressing myself at the conversational speed we're going at now because I'm *grabbing* for words. I still suffer from anxiety *appallingly*...."

Until recently Vivian Stanshall lived aboard an adequate houseboat, but it sunk, taking his library, his recording studio and his collection of turtles with it. And now he's here in a poky bedsit with just his collection of art things and a trio of goldfish swimming around in a tiny tank for company.

But things are looking up. In one corner of Vivian Stanshall's four walls there hang three vulgar items. They look out of place amongst Viv's primitive and fetching paintings. They are silver discs - not Bonzo Dog Band silver discs (there are none of those) but Steve Winwood silver discs. Vivian Stanshall has for some time been providing lyrics for Winwood – he wrote the words of the song Arc Of A Diver; it seems an unlikely match, the loon and the smoothie, but it is so. Stanshall met "Winnie", as he calls him, through Jim Capaldi, who popped up on stage one night at a Bonzos show: "Legs Larry was off with Moonie getting drunk and we were about to start playing so I begged a drummer from the audience and Jimmy Capaldi climbed up. Jimmy and I became friends and then he took me to Winnie's place where there was port and yoga and we became friends."

Royalties from the ensuing collaborations should be rolling in soon ... There's money too in the voice-oven for commercials he's now doing (in tones so plush and sumptuous, they put even "Sir" Donald Sinden to shame). There's a soon-to-be-performed comic opera (follow-up to the recently staged Stinkfoot), a further Sir Henry saga on LP to come, and there's life in this old "bean" yet ...

"I'm hoping that next year I'll be well enough to get up on stage and perform myself. I just daren't risk it at the moment. It's too soon. But I'd love to do a musical album and go on the road again. That would be marvellous. I'm a difficult sod to sell, I know, because no-one quite knows who I am anymore. I don't know who I am anymore. But so *what?* Bugger it, I say, old bean. Bugger it!"



Stanshall and Keith Moon engage in Third Reich-styled capers in '71: "Moon and I getting plastered together was a very good idea, actually. For about four years we were boozing and then recovering in sauna baths."