

The Jive Aces formed in 1989, and are still swinging almost four decades later



# SWINGING AWAY THE BLUES

**The Jive Aces have been at the forefront of the UK swing revival for nearly 40 years. On the release of their new album, they talk to *Vintage Rock* about everything from Louis Prima and Elvis Presley to Eric & Ernie and King Charles III...**

WORDS BY STEVE O'BRIEN

**T**here aren't many bands out there whose music is so exuberant, so joyous and so life-affirming that it's been prescribed to help combat depression.

"This doctor told us that instead of giving his patient meds straight off, he said, 'You need to watch this video of The Jive Aces doing *Bring Me Sunshine*,'" the swing outfit's lead vocalist, Ian Clarkson, tells *Vintage Rock*, still slightly disbelieving 13 years on. "It was around the time of the economic depression, and I think that was one of the points, like with all the jazz and swing during WW2 and rock'n'roll coming



in when the Korean War was happening... When there's a bit of a downturn, people turn to happy music."

That's why, with the world in such disarray right now, we need The Jive Aces more than ever – and why their latest record, *Good Rockin' Tonight: The Roots Of The King*, is a much-needed tonic to apocalyptic news headlines and rocketing energy bills. Described by the band as "a celebration of the music that inspired Elvis Presley", it's a 12-song collection of feel-good bangers, delivered with gusto by a band who, after their barnstorming audition on *Britain's Got Talent* in 2012, were described by judge Alesha Dixon as

"a ray of sunshine". (They made it all the way through to the semi-finals.)

This is The Jive Aces' 15th long-player (the band released their debut, *Jumpin' With The Aces*, in 1992) and their first to pay tribute to those artists who laid the foundations for rock'n'roll's greatest performer. It's been a long time coming. Clarkson says that he and drummer Peter Howell, who he met at school in Billericay, first discovered the singers behind such evergreens as *That's All Right*, *Hound Dog* and *Blue Moon Of Kentucky* before they'd even hit 13.

"People often ask, how did you all get into this music, living in Essex," he says, recalling his schooldays soaking up such artists as Louis Prima and Cab Calloway, as well as the giants of rock'n'roll. "We were into Elvis and in those days you played the album and read the sleeve notes, and it would have these names like 'Big Boy' Crudup and Big Mama Thornton, so then we went backwards into blues."

It was actually Baz Luhrmann's *Elvis* biopic from 2022 that rekindled Clarkson's love of the King, and started the chain of events that would lead to this album, with many of the songs that make up this tracklist – including *Lawdy Miss Clawdy*, *Only You* and *Rip It Up* – first receiving a Jive Aces pimp-up in the band's acclaimed *Roots Of Elvis* live show.

"That film brought it all back to me," the singer enthuses about the Austin Butler-fronted blockbuster. "I suddenly felt 12 years old again. So on the album, like with the show, we do the original versions, but do them in our own way. It's funny, because we have the same roots – the roots of Elvis are also the roots of the band and it was through Elvis that we found the older, more Black rhythm and blues and early jive. We were quite surprised that everyone loved it so much."

Covers have long been a staple of The Jive Aces' repertoire, but not for them the go-to rock'n'roll standards. They wowed the judges of *Britain's Got Talent* with a snappy rendition of *I Wan'na Be Like You* from *The Jungle Book* ("absolutely brilliant," cooed the notoriously grouchy Simon Cowell), a tune originally essayed by their hero, Louis Prima. Then there was *Bring Me Sunshine*, most famous for soundtracking *The Morecambe & Wise Show*, the medically-approved video of which has – at the time of going to press – notched up a staggering 3.8 million views on YouTube.

When we ask how they decided upon this Arthur Kent/Sylvia Dee-penned tune as a single, Clarkson has a name-drop to kill for. It's common for potential 45s to be focus-grouped with friends and colleagues, but more unusual for it to be road-tested on a future king.

"We were at this veterans' charity do and Prince Charles was there," he recalls of the track's peculiar genesis. "I was standing there with this ukulele that I'd got for Christmas, and he walked up to me and asked, 'I say, are you going to do some George Formby?'. At the time I didn't know any



# The Hardy Boy

The Jive Aces' love of Louis Prima is so great that they once planned to record a podcast devoted to the American trumpeter, singer and bandleader, Clarkson reveals. "We knew Van Morrison was a fan so we interviewed him for it," he says, adding, "and we also talked to Tom Hardy."

Excuse me? Tom Hardy, as in *Mad Max: Fury Road* and *The Dark Knight Rises* fame?

"His wife used to sing with us," Clarkson says, "a girl called Charlotte Riley [though now an actor, in a previous life she was a member of singing group The Flirtinis and provided backup vocals for the Aces]. So he used to come to our gigs, and he loved Louis Prima. I don't know if you know, but we used to work with his daughter, Toni Prima. She used to sing with us, and we invited her and her mother Keely Smith to England and Tom was there. It was funny because he met Toni Prima, and she was like 'Oh my god, it's Tom Hardy', and he's going, 'Oh my god, it's Louis Prima's daughter!' We were going to talk to Lenny Henry too – it's amazing all these people that love Louis Prima."

► George Formby, but I did know *Bring Me Sunshine*, which was one of the first songs I learned on it. Then I got thinking that the royal family liked Morecambe & Wise, so I said, 'I don't know any George Formby but you'll love this,' and I started playing and singing *Bring Me Sunshine*. Then I suddenly thought, 'I'm serenading the prince! I can't just stop in the middle, I have to complete the whole song!' But amazingly he stood there and really enjoyed it, and I thought, gosh, everybody loves this song."

At the time, the band were working on an album titled *King Of The Swingers*, a tribute to their beloved Louis Prima, and it suddenly hit Clarkson that,

with a bit of work, *Bring Me Sunshine* would fit just perfectly.

"So I said, 'If we start slowly with the ukulele like I did with the prince we can turn it into a Louis Prima song', you know, just speed it up," he recalls. "Then it gets people dancing. We did the music video after that and somebody we knew had got 100,000 views on YouTube for theirs, and we were like, gosh, let's see if we can beat that, and within a week we'd done a million!"

That video, directed by Rebecca Grant, clearly worked its magic, and has – over the years – driven tens of thousands to The Jive Aces' live shows, and it's on stage where this band truly shine. Gussied up in canary-yellow suits, their performances are high-velocity, pedal to the metal affairs and every bit as exhilarating as that celebrated promo.

"People are like, 'You do all this old music', but we do such a range," Clarkson says of the group's throwback sound. "I mean, on this album, it's not just blues even, it's gospel, there's a bit of hillbilly, and we also like jazz and skiffle."

So if there's someone who's never been to a Jive Aces live show, just what should they expect?



Jive Aces drummer Peter Howell, who met frontman Ian Clarkson at school

"It's all stuff that's evolved over the years, through watching old videos of everything from Cab Calloway and Louis Jordan in the 40s to Jerry Lee Lewis and Elvis and Chuck Berry," Clarkson says. "They were all showmen as well as musicians. Look at The Treniers, in 1948 they were doing music that sounded like rock'n'roll in Vegas and jumping all over the place. They did a lot of show. I mean, we'll throw in *Great Balls Of Fire* now and



The Jive Aces' double bass player Ken Smith, one of the founding members of the band

then for fun, but really we're roots, though not in a serious way – just as the great, happy, fun music that it was. By the end of our shows we have everyone up and dancing, so you'll be tapping your toes at least. My mantra is we've always tried to make it memorable, and that's why we have a lot of guests as well."

It's not a surprise that guest performers are so welcome into the Jive Aces family. While many bands are a hermetically-sealed unit, suspicious of outsiders and anyone that might upstage them, the Aces radiate inclusivity and regularly hook up with not just their still-performing heroes, but other retro-heads, forever curious to see what alchemy emerges on stage.

"We're doing this charity show in August called *Summertime Swing*," he reveals about the group's immediate plans. "We do it every year and this year we're working with this blues singer from Paris, a girl from New Jersey who's an amazing R&B performer and a young guitarist who plays with [French rockabilly outfit] Les Forbans. We've had everybody there – from Vince Eager to Marty Wilde last year."

## "WE DO LIKE OUR FANS BUYING OUR ALBUMS BUT WE'RE ALSO HAPPY IF THEY GET ONTO SPOTIFY AND LISTEN TO ALL THE ORIGINAL MATERIAL"

A brilliant by-product, of course, of having these octogenarian legends on stage with the band is that it's introducing their music to a younger generation. Don't go thinking, you see, that a Jive Aces audience is all ripening rockers – age-wise it really does run the gamut.

"Of course we have the middle-aged and up crowd who remember the music," Clarkson says, "but there are also 20-somethings, and they don't even know what the music is. They don't know whether to call it jazz or blues or rock'n'roll. They're like, 'Oh my god, I've never seen this before – what is this music?'" So we're bringing it to a new audience. If you make the show an experience, not just a concert, people walk away with a happy memory. But we've

always told people who we were inspired by, like with this album and the Louis Prima one. We've created Louis Prima fans in England, people who would never have known who he was, other than as King Louie from *The Jungle Book*. Now we're getting people going, 'I love Elvis, but I didn't realise where his roots were,' then they look them up. We do like our fans buying our albums but we're also happy if they get onto Spotify and listen to all the original material as well. That's our gospel, that's what we're trying to spread."

The warmth and joie de vivre that the Aces exhibit on stage isn't something that can be conjured. That's a quality hard to fake if you're a band that actively detest each other. There are many groups that stay together simply for the £££s, as well as bands who have shed so many members over the years that they barely resemble the one that started out. But not so for The Jive Aces. They've pretty much kept the same line-up since forming in 1989 and appear just as close now, despite living in each others' pockets for nearly four decades. To what does Clarkson attribute the Aces' longevity?

"We're friends first and we get along well together," he smiles. "And everyone in the band are brilliant musicians. I mean, Big John, our saxophone player, I can't think of a better sax player in the world of rhythm and blues and rock'n'roll in the UK. But I didn't choose people based just on how great they were as a musician. You have to sit in a van with them for 12 hours, you know! We're all a bunch of guys that really love the music and we communicate well with each other. We've known each other so long we can sit down and write a song together, we do the arrangements and the chemistry works. That's the secret – just communicating."

As befitting a band as unstoppably positive as The Jive Aces, they're now planning their first-ever Christmas album. They've played festive numbers before, but never tracklisted an entire Xmas LP, which is odd as the idea of a festive Jive Aces record just seems so incredibly *right*.

"The thing that people most ask for when they come up to the record stall at a gig is, 'Have you got a Christmas album?'" Clarkson laughs. "We got some of the obvious Christmas songs on there, and we've written some new ones. I mean, we've got *Good King Wenceslas* and done it like a Bobby Darin song, then we got things like *Joy To The World*, which we've made

into a really fast boogie-woogie track! So hopefully that works."

Not for The Jive Aces a gloomy cover of *Fairytale Of New York* or a cry-fest like *The Little Boy That Santa Claus Forgot*. Even *Blue Christmas*, by their adored Elvis Presley, is off the menu. Because depressing us – whether it be in January or June or December – is not what the Aces are about. Uplifting music for worrying times – it's just what the doctor ordered.

*Good Rockin' Tonight* is out on 31 July ★



Latest album *Good Rockin' Tonight* collects the songs that inspired Elvis Presley, including *Mystery Train* and *Only You*

## TV OR NOT TV

Earlier this year, Clarkson revealed that the band had recorded a TV pilot with Phil Crosby, grandson of another one of their heroes – Bing, of course. So where are they with that, and what can he tell us about it?

"We did it with Mike Read and it's currently being edited," he tells us. "It's sort of like a game show, a bit like those American ones like *What's My Line?* So Phil Crosby comes on and people ask, right, who is he? – that sort of thing, and then he does a song with us. He's a lovely chap. After that, we went off to France and he came with us. Then we saw him again in America, and he sang with us over there as well. But yeah, in answer to your question, they're editing it, but I don't know when or where it will be played."