

Black Grape's Shaun Ryder and Paul "Kermit" Leveridge celebrate 30 years of *It's Great When You're Straight... Yeah* with a UK tour this autumn

SHAUN RYDER

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IN 1995, SHAUN RYDER HAD BEEN WRITTEN OFF AS YESTERDAY'S MAN. WITH THE HAPPY MONDAYS BEHIND HIM IN THE REAR VIEW MIRROR, NOBODY EXPECTED THE SINGER TO RETURN WITH A NEW BAND AND A NO.1 ALBUM. YET THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT HE DID. HERE HE TALKS TO CLASSIC POP ABOUT THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF BLACK GRAPE'S PLATINUM-SELLING DEBUT LP, *IT'S GREAT WHEN YOU'RE STRAIGHT...YEAH*

STEVE O'BRIEN

Q Released on 7 August 1995, *It's Great When You're Straight... Yeah* was, in Shaun Ryder's words, his great "fuck you" album after the dissolution of Happy Mondays. Still battling drug problems, and with Madchester now in the past, not much was expected of Ryder's next project, that is if he was even *compos mentis* enough to get one together. But teaming up with former Ruthless Rap Assassin member Paul "Kermit" Leveridge and old buddy Bez would prove a masterstroke and their first LP together as Black Grape would become the singer's first No.1 record, while also producing hit singles in Reverend Black Grape, *In The Name Of The Father* and *Kelly's Heroes*. To mark this album's Pearl Anniversary, he and Kermit are going back on the road this November and December for an 11-date mini-tour.

What does *It's Great When You're Straight...Yeah* mean to you, 30 years on?

When the Mondays split, the rest of the band were saying about me and Bez, "Those two fookin' losers, dancing with Zippy and Bungle, where's their career goin'?" I mean, we kept it really quiet

what we were doing, and so when [the album] came out and went to No.1, it was like, "Fuck off!!" So I've got very fond memories of it, even though, despite it being called *It's Great When You're Straight...*, we were all off our tits.

So you must have felt somewhat vindicated, having such massive success – even bigger than anything you had experienced with Happy Mondays.

It was the best feeling in the world. We knew he had something special. We were signed by Gary Kerr first. He was American and so he was going through the US market. See, at the time,

we'd have done it a bit more hip-hop, but in America, there weren't many white kids doing hip-hop with Black kids. So we would hand songs in, and he wanted everything a bit more guitar-oriented, so he could sell it to an American audience.

What was the vibe like when you started Black Grape, compared to those final few years with the Mondays?

It was a totally new thing for me, because I'd never worked with professional musicians before. You know, all of the Mondays were self-taught. Black Grape really was me and Kermit and then the rest were session guys, apart from Wags [the late Paul Wagstaff, guitarist, who died in March this year]. It was Danny Saber who played most of the parts on that record, but when you take an album out on the road, you gotta put a band together to play it. So there were all these session guys, and that was the first time I'd ever played with proper musicians, who could keep time and knew what they were doing. It was a piece of piss on stage for me, so it was great and we became like a family and a proper band. Eventually, it ended up everyone getting off their nut and partying... apart from Ged [Lynch], the drummer.

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However, Black Grape, in its first incarnation, split in 1998 after releasing your second album, *Stupid Stupid Stupid*.

For Kermit, it was his first time with things like *Top Of The Pops* and being famous. You handle that in different ways, and he was getting a lot of stuff like, "You can fuck him off! You can be like Tupac!" and he started swallowing that. So by the time we were doing the second album, he'd had all this shit going in his ear, and he wasn't turning up, so it was time to pack it in.

You're going on the road with this album, but you've told us before your memory isn't great with your own lyrics...

Imagine this, like you wrote a book or a novel, and you go onto the stage without that book and you have to recite every fucking word of it! I am ADHD and I don't retain information. Learning's all about remembering, and if you're not going to remember shit, what the teachers are telling you, you're not going to get a fucking A-level. Might be good for the pub quiz, but it's not going to pass any exams. I was easily distracted. If there are teachers in a class, I'm over there looking at pigeons.

So even if you listen and re-listen to your songs before a show, the words still don't go in?

Nah, I have an autocue. Even if I listen to them constantly, it wouldn't make a blind bit of difference. I've had autocue for years and years now but before that, I used to have the lyrics written on the stage floor.

Will Bez be joining you on the road for this tour?

Bez doesn't do Black Grape now. He wasn't there towards the end of the band, though he started off in it. We've got the Mondays going at the same time as Black Grape and Mantra Of The Cosmos, so Bez stays out of Black Grape, but he's in the other two.

What's the situation with the Happy Mondays at the moment? It's been a traumatic few years for the group with your brother Paul dying [the bass player passed away in 2022] and Rowetta leaving.

The Mondays now is great. Up to recently, we didn't have a really happy firm, but Black Grape's always been a pleasure. We've been at it for 10 years with the same line-up. I mean, Kermit and I don't argue over stupid fuckin' drug-related bullshit. Even though we're not off our tits now, we're still the same. We write exactly the same and we both still like a drink when we're in the studio, so it's better than ever. I mean, I get asked all the time, do I miss those days, and I'm like, "no I fuckin' don't". I was happy doing all the shit that comes



Ruthless Rap Assassins' Kermit joined Ryder in Black Grape after Happy Mondays disbanded in 1993

with being young and mad, but now I'm happy being an old c*nt who's a bit boring, who just goes back after the fucking gig to watch the news.

You've released two Black Grape albums since reforming in 2015, but we haven't had a new Mondays record since 2007's *Uncle Dysfunktional*. Is there one planned?

After I've done the Black Grape tour, I've got to start writing the new Mondays album. I actually should have gone in the studio about a month ago to start writing tracks.

And then there's your other group, Manta Of The Cosmos, which you're in with Bez, Zak Starkey and Andy Bell. You've released a few singles, but is there a full album in the offing?

We've already got an album there! We've got about 50 tracks, so at the moment Zak is just trying to find a deal to see whoever puts it out.

You're celebrating 30 years of *It's Great When You're Straight... Yeah*, but 2027 will be the 40th anniversary of the first Mondays album, *Squirrel And G-Man*. Any plans to tour that LP?

That album is so hard to play. We didn't know what we were doing. John Cale came and produced that. Thinking

about it, he must have just been in his late thirties or early forties, and all the madness of his younger days in The Velvet Underground he'd knocked out of the window. So he was very straight, eating tangerines and watching the news. He was like the schoolteacher and we were the glue-sniffing kids. John basically pressed play and record, so what he got with that album was basically us live at the time. I mean, we've tried – we brought out a couple of the tracks, the ones that we can do, into the greatest hits set. But yeah, I'd love to go out and do a tour of that album.

And finally, what's the deal on the big screen biopic you were teasing a few years ago?

Matt Greenhalgh, who wrote the Amy Winehouse one [*Back To Black*] and the Joy Division film [*Control*], wanted to direct it, but he didn't like what the Yanks – who put half the money in – wanted to do with it, which was basically turn it into that format that they do with these sort of films. So now it's going to be a documentary supposedly. They're the big thing now, aren't they. ■

● **Tickets for Black Grape's *It's Great When You're Straight... Yeah* tour are available from [crosstownconcerts.seetickets.com/tour/black-grape](https://www.crosstownconcerts.seetickets.com/tour/black-grape)**

In August 1995, Black Grape's debut studio LP, *It's Great When You're Straight... Yeah*, replaced Supergrass' *I Should Coco* at the top of the UK charts

