

Gary Numan - Hammersmith Apollo, London - November 28, 2014

by Mireille Beaulieu

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Gary Numan's recent concert at London's Hammersmith Apollo had long been announced as a major event.

This show was the crowning moment of the world tour Numan had undertaken in October 2013, as he was promoting his new album *Splinter (Songs from a broken mind)*. Undoubtedly one of the artist's major works, *Splinter* garnered unparalleled public and critical acclaim. It even entered the UK Top 20 – the first Numan album to do so since *Warriors* in 1983. Gary Numan started this long tour in the US before visiting the UK, Ireland, Israel, continental Europe (but sadly not Paris), Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Photos: Louise Barnes and Jim Napier



© Jim Napier

But it was also a “homecoming concert”, a return to his roots for Numan, who currently resides in Los Angeles. For the first time since 1996, he was to take over the Hammersmith Apollo, the legendary UK venue formerly known as the Hammersmith Odeon. This is where David Bowie killed off his Ziggy Stardust character in 1973... Around the same period, a teenage Gary (then still Gary Webb) would often attend gigs there. Then, with the explosion of the Numan phenomenon in 1979, the “Hammy” became for many years the London venue of his choice when he was touring. Gary, who was born in Hammersmith, obviously has a deep connection with the place.

A few surprises had been announced for this concert, in particular around the 35th anniversary of two of Gary Numan’s founding records: **Replicas** and **The Pleasure Principle**, and **Berserker**’s 30th anniversary. So expectations were high. Numan enjoys a significant cult following; on that evening of November 28, fans coming from all parts of the UK and Ireland, but also from continental Europe and even further away (Australia, Singapore...) are gathering in front of the Hammersmith Apollo.

The venue’s magnificence is amazing – it actually is a former cinema, built in 1932 and carefully restored.



Gang of Four © Jim Napier

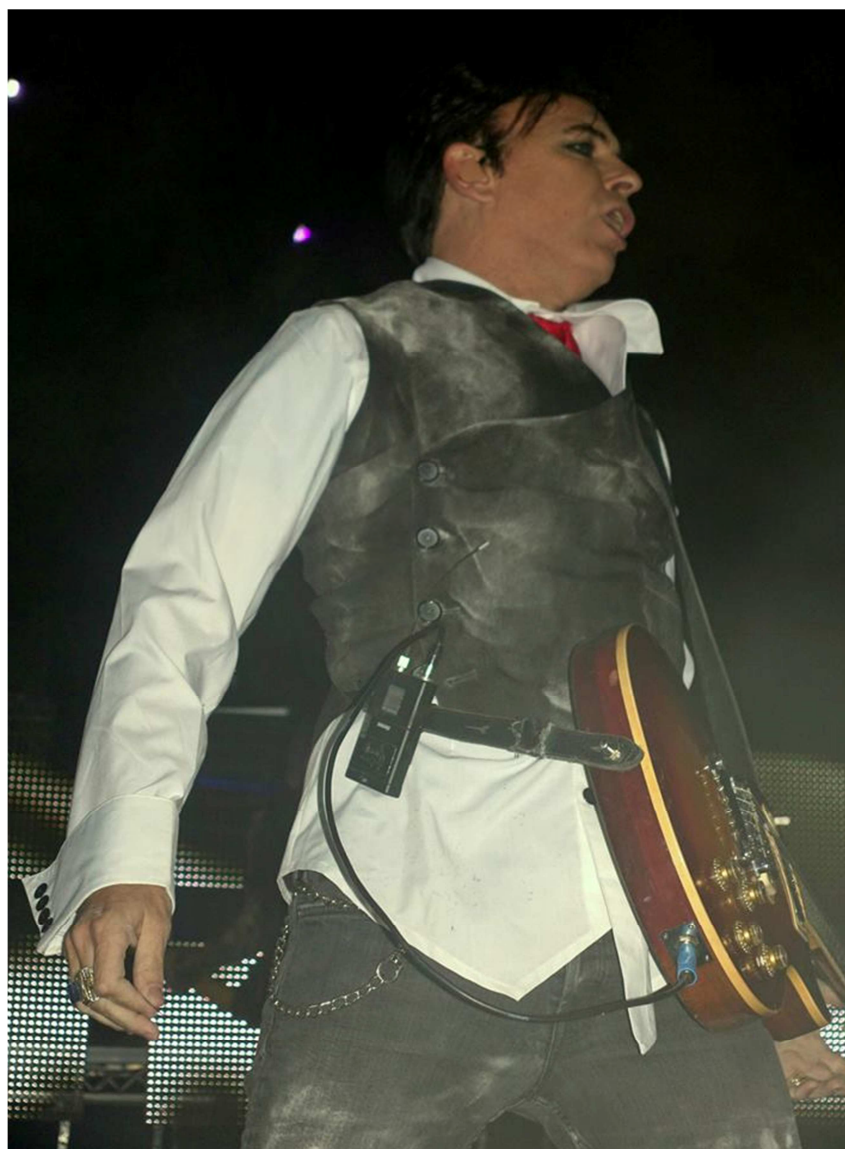
Gang of Four opens the show. Guitarist Andy Gill is the only original member of the famous post-punk group. He is surrounded by young musicians, singer John “Gaoler” Sterry, bass player Thomas McNeice, drummer Jon Finnigan and a mysterious new female recruit. The band has kept its experimental, anti-establishment spirit. Among the highlights there are abrasive versions of « Anthrax », « To Hell With Poverty » and « Damaged Goods ». The rendition of « He’d Send In The Army » is now a kind of ritual: during the whole song, John Sterry methodically destroys a microwave oven (as a symbol of consumer society). But Gang of Four’s tight performance gets a mixed reception – what the major part of the audience is eagerly waiting for is Gary Numan.

During the interval, the tension is building up. Everyone knows that Numan (who is suffering from a cold) has serious voice problems. For a couple of days, he kept on publishing a series of Internet messages that reflected his growing concern. It will later be known that the concert nearly got cancelled...



Behind schedule. The huge structure resonates with the *Numanoids'* chant: « Nuuumaaaaaaan »!

As the lights go out, the deafening screams of the crowd are covered by the first bars of the instrumental track « Resurrection ». The word *Splinter* glows in the background... Gary Numan and his band appear through a flood of dry ice. As a reference to the Victorian **Splinter** image, Numan is wearing an elegantly dusty steampunk outfit: top hat, white shirt, grey waistcoat and red cravat on charcoal grey jeans and boots. He instantly throws the hat in the crowd. And grasping his beloved Gibson Les Paul guitar, he begins a fierce choreography with his bass player and guitarist.



He soon drops the waistcoat and cravat, and carries on with an intense rendering of « Everything Comes Down To This ». His voice is fragile, but it holds out... The white shirt also disappears - Gary Numan is now wearing a black t-shirt with a stylized pattern. At the end of the song, he addresses the audience, visibly moved: the Hammersmith Apollo is packed. He apologizes about his voice (« For all those who have come from far and wide, from Australia... ») and explains: « I had an injection... In my arse! ». Roaring cheers...

Then he launches into « Me! I Disconnect From You »... And the crowd goes wild – Gary has not played « MIDFY » (which opened the **Replicas** album) in a long time. He delivers a particularly exhilarating version of the song.

And for nearly two hours, time seems to stand still in the Hammersmith Art Deco cathedral. Gary Numan takes over the vast stage with a striking presence. His performance is extremely physical and often close to a trance - successively sensual and convulsive, alternating headbanging and graceful moves. Numan smiles ecstatically most of the time – something he rarely does.



Behind him, large LED panels surround the drum and keyboard riser. This screen displays beams of harsh, almost stroboscopic light, as well as films - graphics, video excerpts and symbolic images that flood the stage with ever-changing reflections. An elaborate light-show enhances this set-up.

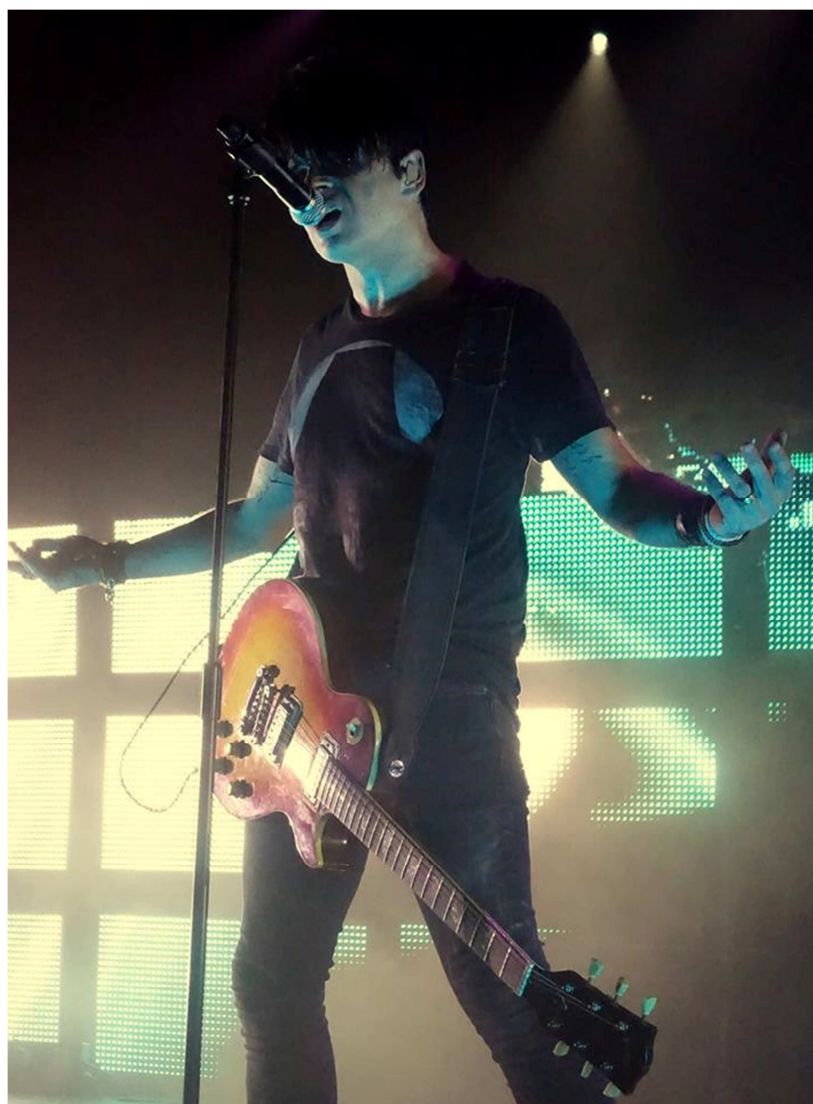
The set list favours **Splinter** tracks, which alternate with classics such as « Metal », « Films », « I Die:You Die » and even « Cars », played with flamboyance. The high vault is filled with a continuous roar. The spectators sing along, clap and raise their hands. During the timeless « Down In The Park », Steve Harris (minus guitar) cheerfully dances around, as Gary strikes one of his former “android” poses.

The sound is powerful, shaped by brilliant musicians, regulars Richard Beasley (drums), Steve Harris (guitar) and Tim Muddiman (bass guitar). They have recently been joined by Josh Giroux, who replaces Ade Fenton on keyboards (Giroux has also designed the **Splinter** artwork). All the older tracks have been reworked to match the **Splinter** soundscape. The arrangements and tonalities are now more electric and more industrial, but the synth layers are still at the forefront.



Numan had announced he would bring back – but only for this very concert – one of his old analog synthesizers, the excellent Oberheim OB-Xa (originally used in the early Eighties). Tonight, the analog electronic sounds of some of the older tracks provide a fascinating contrast with the digital tones and textures of the more recent material.

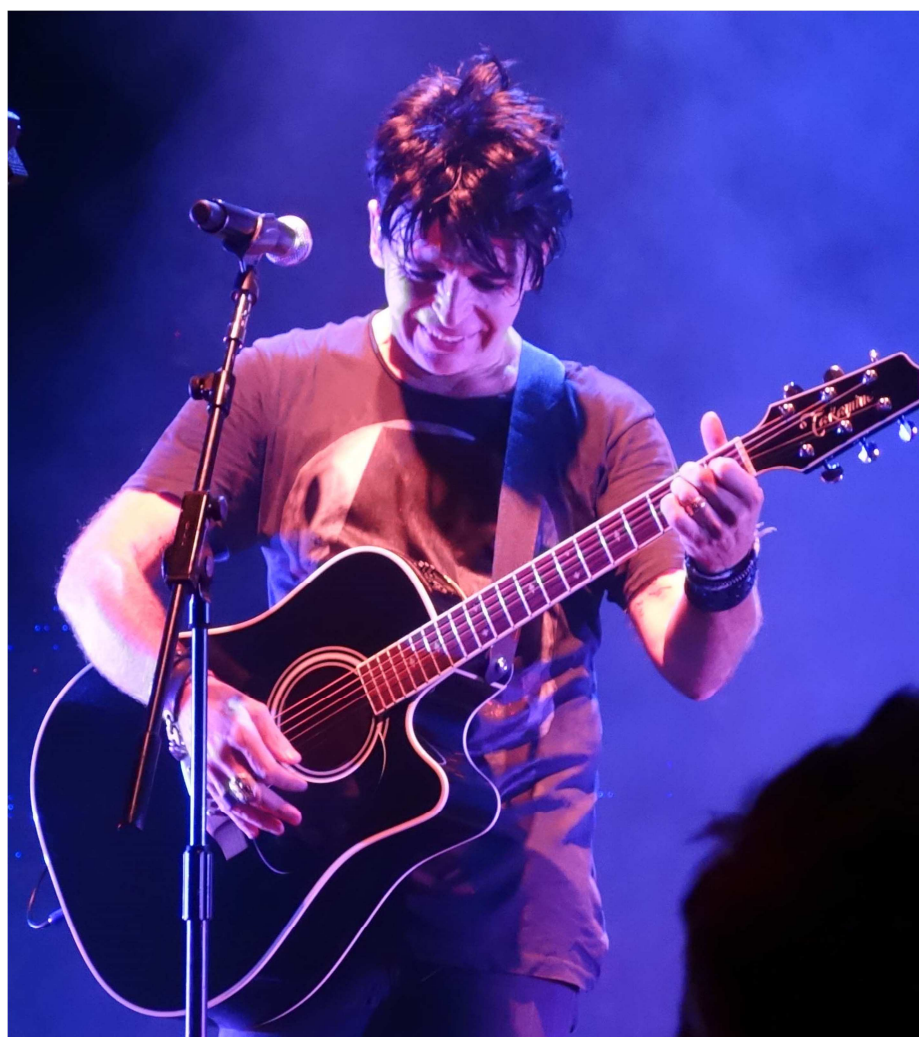
The OB-Xa had been used on the **Berserker** 1984 tour... And soon the thundering bass lines of the title track burst in. On the LED panels, a blue mouth on a white face (the colours of the **Berserker** album) symbolises the ethereal female backing vocals. These are now virtual and they get ripped by Steve Harris' dissonant guitar riffs. When he is not singing, Gary Numan undulates and conveys the beat through his body moves... This live performance of « Berserker » confirms the song's impact – it is still very unusual and “out there”.



The sparkling renditions of the famous 1979 B-side « We Are So Fragile » and of the **Telekon** era single « We Are Glass » (1980) are other strong moments.

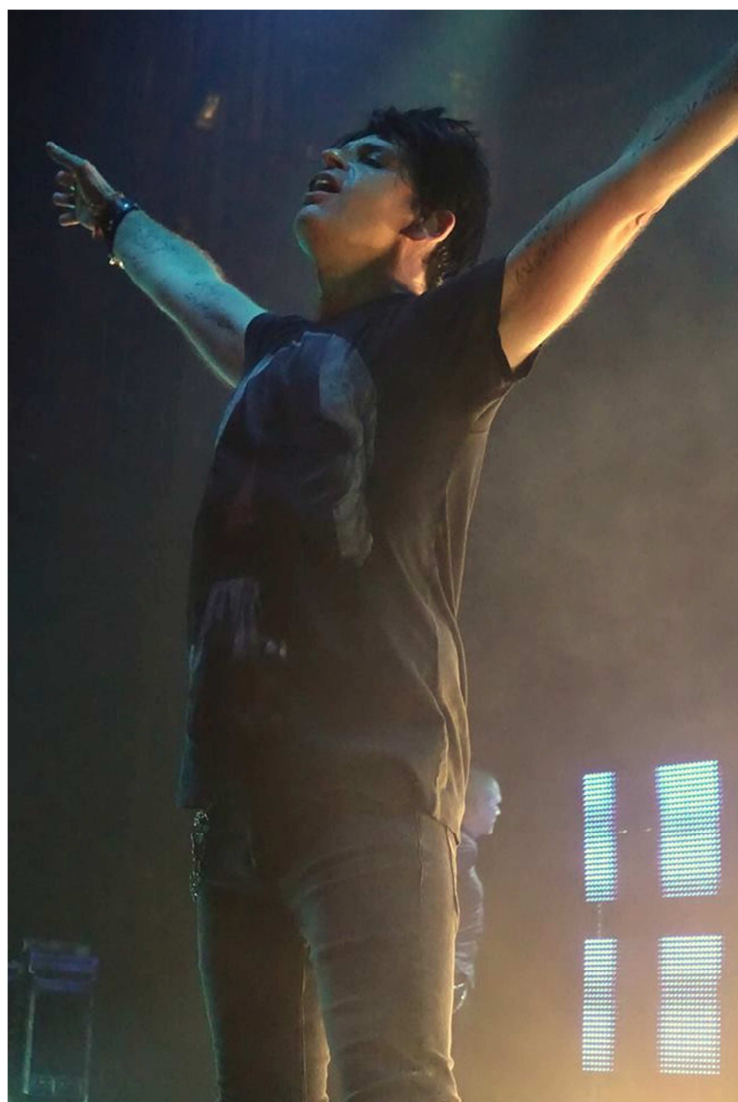
The **Dead Son Rising** album (2011) had introduced the show with « Resurrection ». Two other songs from **DSR** are played tonight: the melancholic and haunting « Dead Sun Rising » (in a different version, the Sonoio AKA Alessandro Cortini remix), and the electro-hypnotic single « The Fall ». « The Fall » and, in a similar vein, « Love Hurt Bleed » (the first single from **Splinter**) feel more organic and incredibly efficient live.

Another cult anthem: « Pure » (from the album of the same name, 2000), for which a highly expressive Numan uses his guitar as a prop, as he raises it above his head during the chorus.



But the heart of the concert is indeed **Splinter** (eight songs). Gary Numan is not interested in nostalgia. And he is still as creative as ever. His recent material shows how much his songwriting has gained in scope and sonic depth, especially when played live.

The deflagrations of the « I Am Dust » single (paired with visual flashes) lift the audience... « The Calling » has a gripping lyricism of its own. Numan plays the track's main melody on his Access Virus digital synthesizer. « Splinter » is a shock, with its Middle Eastern chant and dark lyrics. Gary's bruised voice projects a strong emotional charge, as images of the Shoah relentlessly fill the LED screen. Just before the encore, the superb « My Last Day » first focuses on Gary Numan's sensitive vocals, before bursting into an almost symphonic string crescendo.



The crowd is raving when Gary reappears with an acoustic guitar. He apologizes again for his voice – hoping he will manage to sing the next song (« If I can't, you'll do it! ». Numan never talks much on stage, but tonight is an exception). And he starts playing « Jo The Waiter »... This stripped-down song (one of the gems of Tubeway Army's first, self-titled album – 1978) had disappeared for years from his set lists. His voice doesn't falter, and the moment becomes truly magical, with the whole Hammersmith Apollo clapping and singing along.

The emotion is still tangible when Gary begins « A Prayer For The Unborn » (from the **Pure** album), one of his most personal songs. The screen is covered with images of pregnancy ultrasound scans... And Gary delivers a poignant and feverish rendition of « APFTU».

The last encore is the iconic « Are 'Friends' Electric? », played in its current version, more minimalist and also more... « electric ». As he sings the line « You see, this means everything to me », Gary Numan reaches out to the five thousand people facing him.

After a moving goodbye with his musicians, Numan disappears. He comes back with his three daughters Raven (11), Persia (9) and Echo (7). An extraordinary moment, met with a long standing ovation. The Hammersmith Apollo is enraptured...

When leaving the venue, most of the fans rate tonight's show as the best Gary Numan concert since the "farewell" 1981 Wembley nights. In any case, it is one of the most outstanding gigs I ever attended. And Numan is currently experiencing a true renaissance: a creative peak with **Splinter**, a triumphant homecoming to the legendary Hammersmith Apollo (filling such a venue a few years ago may not have been possible for him)... A few hours later, he sent the following Internet message: "The most stressful day of my life became the best gig of my life. THANK YOU HAMMERSMITH, I'm HUGELY emotional now. It's good to be back."

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