



THE SKIFFLE CRAZE that swept teenage Britain in the late Fifties was to unearth one of the country's most charismatic singers, one who was to carry the standard of rock'n'roll almost single-handedly before 1962 and Merseybeat. Born Frederick Heath in Willesden, North London on 23 November 1939, Johnny Kidd took his professional name after his skiffle group, the Nutters, became the Pirates in 1958. He soon made the decision to turn professional, retaining lead guitarist Alan Caddy and engaging the services of bassist Brian Gregg and drummer Clem Cattini. Although proficient at banjo and guitar from his skiffle days, Kidd elected to keep his hands free to wield – and occasionally throw – an antique naval cutlass onstage.

The band's appearance on BBC's 'Saturday Club' radio show led to the offer of a recording contract with HMV Records. The Pirates' dynamic stage act had already marked them out as something special and, against the odds, they translated the greater part of their magic onto vinyl in the shape of 'Please Don't Touch', their first single release, in mid-1959. A raw, up-tempo stomper, it traded Kidd's pleading tenor voice against a growling bass chant, with treble guitar licks punctuating the verses of an instant classic. What made it all the more remarkable was that Kidd had co-written both sides with manager Guy Robinson.

'Please Don't Touch' was a stunning debut by any yardstick, but the eagerly-

Shakin' all Over

How Johnny Kidd took British rock by storm



awaited follow-up was a disappointment. Kidd's crooning of the standard 'If You Were The Only Girl In The World' was an inexplicable release since the B-side, 'Feelin'', had all the hallmarks of a hit. Again, Kidd had co-written this song and, although the next single – a cover of Marv Johnson's 'You Got What It Takes' – was comfortably outsold by the original, Johnny was soon to be given another chance to write a hit.

The release of 'Shakin' All Over' in June 1960, over a year after 'Please Don't Touch', was well worth the wait for Pirates fans. The magic of the repeated descending guitar figure, echoed by the bass, remains unique over 20 years later, and Kidd's edgy yet insistent vocals really did send 'shivers down the backbone' of the British record-buying public. Though it sat uneasily in a chart inhabited by the likes of Connie Francis and the Everly Brothers, 'Shakin'' peaked at Number 3 and proved the breakthrough for Kidd and his crew.

Success bred chart success; the previous year's mistake was not repeated and 'Restless' was a successful, though similar, follow-up which reached Number 18. The Pirates' live show was winning over audiences nationwide; it featured a lighted galleon backdrop dominating the stage

Above: Kidd boards Radio Caroline to help publicise pirate broadcasting. Left: On shore leave with original bassist Brian Gregg (left) and a fan in 1960.

and the musicians in appropriate costumes, as well as the previously-mentioned sword-play. Even more prospective fans were reached by courtesy of TV producer Jack Good's patronage, and it was at his instigation that Kidd adopted an eye-patch to conceal a squint.

Proof that live excitement did not always come over on disc was furnished by 1961's 'Linda Lu' which, although doubtless a stage favourite, sounded somewhat anaemic without the visuals. Kidd's spoken monologue 'Now this is a story 'bout a cute chick ...' may, however, have inspired Van Morrison's ranting on 'Gloria' some three years later. The track was a cover of Ray Sharpe's 1959 US hit.

Another chart failure coincided with a mutiny late in 1961, as the three Pirates



Never Get Over You' sounded pure Liverpool, and stormed the charts in mid-1963. Who needed John and Paul when Kidd could double-track his vocal in unison for the chorus and harmonise in the verse? Mick Green was coerced into playing the appropriate Beatle-like ringing chords, and the result was a Number 4 UK single. The follow-up, 'Hungry For Love', also made the Top Twenty.

An indication of the Pirates' own leanings was a solo group single, 'My Babe', in January 1964. With bassist Spence taking the lead vocal, this was a real bluesy tour de force, scrubbing rhythm chords and a seamless solo amazingly accomplished in a

wards to join Billy J. Kramer's Dakotas.

With the classic Pirates line-up broken, Kidd turned to different sounds in 1964 and 1965 with less than satisfying results. A Hammond organ was recruited for a stab at Hank Williams' 'Your Cheatin' Heart'; while on Jewel Akens' US hit 'The Birds And The Bees' Kidd added a female chorus to little effect - Ray Charles Kidd certainly was *not*. A re-recording of 'Shakin' All Over' failed to repeat the success of the original in 1965 and the band subsequently split. Kidd could not keep off the boards for long, however, and picked up the Regents, renaming them the New Pirates. They were travelling as a support band when Kidd was killed in a road accident near Bury, Lancashire on 7 October 1966.

Sailing into the Seventies

While the former Regents battled on until 1967, Mick Green wielded his axe with such diverse talents as Engelbert Humperdinck and Cliff Bennett but found little recognition. Then in 1975 an Essex band named Doctor Feelgood surfaced with a Pirate-style line-up and their manic, wired-up blues playing laid the foundations for much of the New Wave of the following year. Their guitarist, Wilko Johnson, told *Zigzag* in April 1975 that Mick 'was much closer to the heart of American R&B ... it was like nothing anyone else was playing ... he was one of the very few guitarists in the world who could honestly claim to have added something to the vocabulary of the guitar'.

The time was clearly ripe for a Pirates' revival, and the striped T-shirts and buccaneer boots were duly removed from the mothballs as Messrs Green, Spence and Farley returned to action. The live half of their comeback album, *Out Of Their Skulls*, recorded in April 1977, showed that Green had lost none of his touch, with every guitar break rapturously applauded. The band recorded two further albums, while *Girlschool* and *Motorhead* hit with a version of 'Please Don't Touch' in 1981.

Johnny Kidd's career shows above all, perhaps, the importance of making the right stylistic decisions. Instead of joining the Rolling Stones and the Yardbirds in the British blues vanguard, he plumped for Merseybeat, one step behind the Beatles and losing ground all the way. The loss to British rock was a unique sound, a brilliant guitarist and a hard-nosed R&B sensibility. Maybe Johnny Kidd had been around too long to pass up a lucrative trend, but for all that, the Pirates' legacy to British rock was much, much more than the mere four Top Twenty entries to their name in the record books.

MICHAEL HEATLEY

'We were due at Abbey Road Studios to record 'Yes Sir, That's My Baby' as a single, and the record company had given us the B-side. On the day before the session, we went to the Freight Train coffee bar in Soho, went downstairs, sat on some Coke crates and wrote 'Shakin' All Over' in six minutes or so. We recorded the song live - first take - and left the studios convinced it was going to be the B-side.'

Brian Gregg
Bass player, the Pirates

jumped ship. Amusingly enough, they retained their stage outfits to back Tommy Steele's sibling, Colin Hicks, as the Cabin-boys before Joe Meek recruited them to become members of the Tornados of 'Telstar' fame. Undaunted, Kidd replaced them with bassist Johnny Spence, drummer Frank Farley and short-lived guitarist Johnny Patto. A permanent lead guitarist was found in Mick Green, an associate of Farley and a former shop assistant; his arrival served notice that Kidd and his Pirates were no spent force.

From blues to Merseybeat

The tall, thickset and imposing Green proved the perfect foil for Kidd's stage antics, while his ability to combine rhythm and lead playing in a remarkably fluid way meant that instrumental backing in the studio could thenceforth be laid down in a single take. The first recording by this line-up, 'Shot Of Rhythm And Blues'/'I Can Tell' was released late in 1962 and clearly indicated the direction that Kidd and the Pirates could have followed. Both imported US compositions, they showed off Green's economical soloing and augured well for the Pirates' future influence.

But rather than follow this path, Kidd allowed himself to be swept overboard by the Mersey tide and, instead of forging upstream with a mixture of American covers and self-penned material (as did the Rolling Stones), he turned to imitation. The first fruits were amazingly successful - 'I'll



Top: The Pirates of 1963 comprised, from left, Johnny Spence, Kidd, Frank Farley and Mick Green. Above: Launching into another Kidd classic.

single take. The B-side, 'Casting My Spell', was even better and may well have inspired the young Graham Parker to greater ambitions. With the Pirates in such form, Kidd had no need to resort to choirs or keyboards, but on 'Jealous Girl' Mick Green's guitar was relegated to the background in favour of double-tracked vocals. It was no surprise, then, when Green packed his guitar shortly after-

Johnny Kidd and the Pirates Recommended Listening

The Best Of Johnny Kidd And The Pirates (EMI NUTM12) (A compilation of their hits which includes Shakin' All Over).