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BEANGROWERS

Hailing from the Mediterranean island of Malta, this three-piece has become known for their off-the-wall tunes, an infectious mixture of guitar-based pop and melodious keyboard sounds.

All three Beangrowers were born in 1977 and come from the same town of St Julians (pop. 15,000) in Malta. Alison Galea (vocals/guitar/keyboards), Mark Sansone (bass/synths) and Ian Schranz (drums/synths) have been playing together since 1995. At age 15 Ian and Mark formed the band. Soon after Alison (a long running acquaintance) was recruited as a keyboardist, but when they found out that she could sing too, the guys figured that perhaps it was a good idea to have a singer in the band.



At the age of 18 (in 1996) the band began recording demos, experimenting mainly with sounds deriving from early 50's sci-fi movies and early 80's computer game sounds. It didn't take long before somebody took notice. "We recorded some demos and at that time there was a German producer who liked our music and recommended us to a booking agency".

This resulted in a small club tour in Germany in 1997. "We played a 14-date club tour in Germany", says Alison. "They played up the fact that we were an unknown band coming from Malta and people really seemed to be fascinated by us. Our nationality was always promoted on signs outside of these clubs - Aus Malta!" The band got great reactions from their audiences. At this point people were looking for the band's album in stores. "In the audience at one gig there was a guy from Rough Trade who was really into our music and asked us to do another demo. Soon after we signed a deal".

In 1998, Rough Trade Germany signed the band, and Beangrowers became the first Maltese band to ink an international record deal. "Our signing took a lot of people in Malta by surprise", says Alison. About two years before that, we recorded our first demo at 17, and we didn't think a lot about it, we were just having a good time" says Ian.

Back then, Ian described the music as their attempt "to cross Sonic Youth with the Carpenters". In June 1999 they released the 14-track debut '48k', whose title was inspired by the late lamented 1980s Spectrum computer. "48k is like a 'Best of' of our old songs and demos prior to recording the album in 1998", describes Alison. The album was recorded at Temple Studios and was produced by David Vella and Thomas Hanreich (former singer of Vivid). The final mix was done by Gareth Jones, who has worked with Interpol, Depeche Mode, Clinic, Madness and Nick Cave.

Following the release of their debut they toured extensively across central Europe, and even relocated to Germany for a two-year stint. "At that time we weren't too interested in recording", says Ian. "We were more than anything excited to get the album out and play gigs". The highlight was a spot on the line-up at the opening night of the Popkomm alongside The Tindersticks, Stereophonics and dEUS.

Despite constant touring the Beangrowers found enough time to write their second album. In August 2000 they returned to the studio recording the self-titled "Beangrowers". It was co-produced by David Vella and the band. The mixing was done by Teo Miller who had previously collaborated with Blur, Placebo, James and

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Black Box Recorder. On this opus they showed their full range of their musical ability. Whereas the first long-player had a straighter, rockier direction, this one took some twists and turns along the way. "This was us having loads of fun in the studio and getting totally sucked in", says Ian. "These were songs written by 23-year-olds. You heard the difference". Joining their lineup for the album were a piano, strings, a trumpet and a flugelhorn. "Beangrowers' is a more mature and solid album which allowed us to experiment with our songs and give them a whole new meaning", says Alison.

It was time to give the live audiences a chance to hear the new material. For the next year they played numerous gigs with bands such as Elbow and Slut. In May 2001 they embarked on a solo tour of central Europe.

In May 2002 the Beangrowers album was released in New Zealand through Zomba Records. The first single release from the album, 'Jose' Clemente' was a big hit, and reached an impressive number 7 in the alternative charts down under. Meanwhile the band had continued touring and slowly but surely increasing their fan-base.

At this point, for personal reasons the band had to return to Malta. "We had to stop all promotion on the second album", says Ian. At the same time, their label was bought by BMG.

In the interim period, Alison collaborated on the albums of Zornik, Phillip Boa, Millenia Nova and Thom, and was also on tour with Phillip Boa and the Voodooclub. Mark and Ian continued their careers in film-making.

But the band still had a lot to say, and by the end of the year they were writing new songs. "Moving back to Malta meant songwriting", says Ian. "And we did loads of it". In the following months they started to unveil the finished songs bit by bit during concerts. Some of the first new songs (as yet unreleased) were "Stop Heart" and "The Russian Boulevard".

Over the next few months, the Beangrowers widened their horizons with their debut UK dates, playing a small London Club tour testing the new material.

In March 2004, it was finally time to cross the Atlantic to the United States. Playing a show at the prestigious **SXSW** (South by Southwest Music Festival) in Austin, Texas, the Beangrowers were finally exposed to an unsuspecting American public. "The response from the crowd was overwhelming. After the show we were 'invaded' by the crowd, and after 15 mins we had already sold our last CD", Alison wrote in her tour diary. "Now we can safely say our trip here was successful and a door has been opened to new opportunities." Then it was off to the Big Apple, **New York City**. There they played a gig the Sin-e, the legendary club where Jeff Buckley had recorded his live album. "It was a showcase gig for us because several record industry people were there specifically to 'check us out!', wrote Alison. "We weren't nervous at all, because there was a great atmosphere and we received a very warm welcome by the audience".

The band drew new strength from the journey. "The trip to the US was very inspiring for us all and it gave us the push to work even harder at writing more songs and finishing our next album", says Alison. It was back to the rocking roots of "48k" and beyond. "We demoed every song on a PC at home", says Ian. "In total we wrote and recorded over 30 songs. We recorded slowly and went back into 'Malta relaxed mode'". The album was released in Malta and Austria by the end of 2004 and is set to be out in several other countries like Germany and Switzerland in 2005. *Steven Jørgensen*

Beangrowers: Alison Galea (voc, git), Mark Sansone (b), Ian Schranz (dr)

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