

Anyone making a bid for rock'n'roll stardom in his forties has to be a little mad, right? Well, SIMON HARDEMAN is that man

Better late than never

“Are you ready to RAAAWK?!” the teenage lead singer drawled like he came from Bedford, Massachusetts, rather than Bedford, er, Beds, as he launched into the first example of his band's fifth-hand rifferama. Like so many young bands that my combo, the Sky Pirates, play alongside, they had obviously been practising together since they tired of suffering from Tamagotchi thumb, and so are tighter than Victoria Beckham's jeans – with about the same amount of content.

Perhaps this explains why the singer then felt the need to comment on our tunes, telling the crowd that they were the kind his dad would like. Unfortunately, he then suggested that I had a comb-over. This is how I ended up jumping back on to the stage of London's Lark in the Park and shaking him by the neck. By the time you get to my age you've achieved a level of immaturity that whippersnappers like him can only dream of. And I've a lot of rock'n'roll rebellion to catch up on.

Show me 10 men the wrong side of 40 and I'll show you seven who wish they were on stage with a guitar around

their neck. Until a few months ago that was true of myself, and the Sky Pirates' bassist Simon Littlefield and drummer Nigel Summerley. Now we play the same venues as the next Pete Dohertys and KT Tunstalls, have fights with other bands, get barred from industry hang-outs, and even have groupies (all right, a groupie, but it's a start). And we have, of course, the regulation MySpace presence.

Plenty of other blokes of a certain age fancy themselves in a band. They get together with some friends, a copy of *100 Super Hits of the Seventies*, and move the people-carrier out of the garage. They even tell people that they're in a band. But it doesn't last and, sooner or later, they move on to buying a Harley-Davidson and riding like bad-ass outlaws to the nearest pub on dry Sundays only.

At first we jammed in much the same way, but the noise of the Harley-Davidsons was unmistakable (this is no joke – our rehearsal room was next to the London Hells Angels HQ; you park very carefully there). Then something unexpected happened. We stopped parroting someone else's gibberish about gin-soaked bar-room queens in

Memphis, played our own songs (if it's gibberish at least it's our gibberish), and found we rocked in our very own way. We have tunes we're proud of, that work, that nobody else has done first, and that nobody else does better than us, and not just because nobody else does them. Suddenly we wanted to take it seriously. But we were too old, weren't we?

We knuckled down: we're a trio (or as Nigel, worryingly, puts it, a threesome), so Simon, a wig-out guitarist, had to learn to play bass, I had to learn to play solos, and Nigel had to learn to hang on to his drumsticks while he was playing faster than he ever had before. We decided upon a name and, mindful of the charge of “dad-rock”, we even invented our own genre: ladies and gentlemen, welcome to late-onset rock'n'roll.

The CD we sent out to solicit gigs worked remarkably well (it included a photograph of the band so blurred that had Keith Richards been a Sky Pirate he would still have looked 21). All of the dates were on bills with several other bands, each playing a half-hour set. In a former pub in Islington, in May, we “headlined”.

We soon realised this was

Julia Hamilton



Sitting pretty: (from left) Nigel Summerley, Simon Hardeman and Simon Littlefield

not a prized slot. Invariably, the audience at these events comprises the other bands and their mates, and a marked absence of members of the general public. So we were, in fact, just going on stage last when everyone else had left.

It makes you wonder about how much promoting promoters actually do. One moaned to me about how much money he was losing, but the gig wasn't listed anywhere, even on his own website. It could hardly have been more secret if it had been arranged by Lord Levy. Yet such a promoter will still insist on you bringing along a minimum of between 20 and 50 paying friends. I don't have 50 friends, let alone 50 who would pay to see me play. Had we been 20 years younger, we might still have had legions of university- and school-mates, but nowadays most of our friends are at home

polishing the people-carrier.

Fights enhance your rebel credentials, of course, so we had another, in the café of our rehearsal studios. Now we have to take Thermos flasks to rehearsals, which is less than rock'n'roll. But we still wear shades while drinking from them.

Starting out on this crazy rock'n'roll journey as late as the Sky Pirates have does bring advantages. Imagine if we'd been rock stars for the last 20 years. By now we'd be singing about our third spell in rehab, or our sixth divorce (it's only taken Mike Skinner of The Streets three albums to get to his “downside of fame” phase), or, worse, believing that swearing at politicians or wearing ironic sunglasses could change the world.

Instead, our songs are about the kind of things that affect real people our age, things such as how difficult it

is to stop fancying younger women, or to accept the everyday person you've become. And, most importantly, we rock, not in a heavy-handed, or pompous way, but – we like to think – in a way that comes from tight, lean, guitar music being our musical vernacular. Do the Arctic Monkeys *really* have much to say to people over the age of 35? I don't think so. But we do. And I know we're good. About 20 gigs in, I still haven't heard a single song by a band on a bill with us that I wish I'd written. I know it's only late-onset rock'n'roll, but we like it.

The Sky Pirates' next London shows are Hope and Anchor, Islington, on Wednesday; Pleasure Unit, Bethnal Green, 8 August; and 93 Feet East, Shoreditch, 17 August (www.skypirates.co.uk; www.myspace.com/skypirates)