

Back on the road less travelled

Kid Creole tells Jane Cornwell about his biggest mistake and his best moments

August Darnell bows low, the brim of his white fedora touching my hand. "Charmed, I am sure," he says in a Bronx accent untempered by three decades of European living. "It is so good to be here in London, England, where our overseas fame all started. To come back as a cult figure for a new generation is..." His pencil-thin moustache quivers. "Flattering. Especially when I was looking at my retirement."

Darnell burst on to the music scene in the early Eighties as his alter ego Kid Creole. Zoot-suited and self-assured, sporting high-rise collars and two-tone shoes – all of which he is wearing today – Kid Creole and his glamorous trio of Coconuts fronted a Latin-leaning big band that was part soul revue, part sideshow. Songs played at underground clubs in New York found a mainstream audience in new-wave Britain, where DJs embraced their uncategorisable sound. *Annie, I'm Not Your Daddy* and *Stool Pigeon* were early hits. "He's an old ex-con that's been away/Now he's back, no one's safe," sang the Kid, presciently.

"It's not like we ever broke up," says Darnell, 59, as he sits back on a sofa. "I've always kept the band working. I've taken the great jobs and the s---y jobs. But to be playing London like this" – Kid Creole and the (all new) Coconuts launch *La Linea*, London's Latin music festival, tonight – "is kinda special. Not that we are strictly a Latin band; we've played reggae festivals, pop festivals, every festival known to man."

Kid Creole's cross-cultural aesthetic has its roots in the inner-city ghetto where Darnell and his late elder brother Stony grew up, the sons of a bricklayer with a penchant for sharp clothes and Forties movies. "You had Italian arias next to Caribbean reggae and calypso. You had the salsa of the Puerto Ricans next to the funk of James Brown. At home, it

was Carmen Miranda, Cab Calloway and Frank Sinatra." A rakish smile. "So when I got into a band I naturally wanted to make mongrel music. To try every combination."

In 1974, Darnell was majoring in English and drama when his music-obsessed brother co-opted him into his soul/disco outfit, Dr Buzzard's Original Savannah Band. The quartet's look (Hollywood glamour meets New York gangster) and sound (swing-influenced disco) made them the toast of New York's gay scene; their RCA debut spawned a number one single, *Cherchez la Femme*. They got a manager named Tommy Mottola, who would later become the president of Sony (and husband of Mariah Carey). They played at Studio 54 and other edgier clubs. They hung out with Blondie and Madonna.

But Darnell – then bassist, lyricist and backing singer – wanted more. "It was sibling rivalry," he says. "I grew too big for my britches; I wanted a bigger slice of the pie. I wanted to write some of the music, too. When my brother said, 'Stick to what you do', I jumped ship."

He took the Savannah Band template, topped up the tropical flavourings and created a band where he was the boss – a band that according to pop critic Peter Shapiro "attempted to universalise the plight of

the mulatto misfit". The Kid's macho theatrics were offset by the mock disdain of the oh-so-sexy Coconuts (as led by Darnell's ex-wife, Adriana Kaegi); their songs were danceable, clever, compelling. Bankrolled by the cult ZE label, for which Darnell was a prolific in-house producer, Kid Creole's shows garnered a reputation throughout Europe. Diana, Princess of Wales, booked them for a private show. Prince wrote them a song.

"They loved us in Britain, Italy, Scandinavia. Everywhere. All our early years were spent touring and recording. There was no time for anything else," sighs Darnell, a father

of two. Then they signed to Sony for megabucks, bombed, and were dropped. "Sony didn't get what we were about and we crumbled. Going for the dollars was the biggest mistake of my career, but hey, whaddya supposed to do? It was a learning curve."

These days, Darnell lives in Sweden in a house by a lake on which he sometimes rows. "It's fantastic to be one with nature, especially because it is the opposite of what my life is like on the road. I feel very lucky to have created this iconic image; every time I go through customs I'm asked, 'Where's the Coconuts?'"

Does he go back to the Bronx? "No, because it's a frightening experience. There are people still sitting on the very same stoop in the very same block, 40 and 50 years on. They've never left, never seen Paris or Vienna or London. I could have been one of them. All it takes is one decision. It's like the poet Robert Frost wrote, 'Two roads diverged...'"

Darnell tilts his fedora over his brow. "And baby," he says with a grin, "did I sure take the road less travelled."



Kid Creole and one of his Coconuts on stage in Ireland last year