

# SONG ET LUMIERE

**SAINT ETIENNE** were making immaculate techno-pop records when Blur were still in their baggy-grunge phase. TAYLOR PARKES reckons a) they invented Britpop and b) they're the best group in the world. So he travelled to Paris to tell them, via a track-by-track run-down of 'Too Young To Die', their forthcoming compilation LP. Photos: LILI WILDE



**Name:** SARAH CRACKNELL  
Singer and debt/slog collector  
Favourite bald person: Marion  
Brando



**Name:** PETER WIGGS  
Keyboards and "He Came To Dance"  
Favourite world currency: The  
drachma



**Name:** BOB STANLEY  
Keyboards and puppetmaster  
Favourite major disaster: Torrey  
Canyon



**B**ECAUSE WE CARE, BECAUSE pop is about then, and now, and forever – because Françoise Hardy was always cooler than Jim Morrison (whichever way round you hold the picture), because pop is about the moments when Real Life HAEMORRHAGES (breakfasting on white wine in the frosty winter time, diamonds crunching underfoot), just because... because... when all's said and done, in life, in love, there is next to nothing, but there is not nothing... Saint Etienne, The Best Pop Group In The World. Electronic pulse. Sixties bubblegum, deep dub, chansons d'amour. Founded on pop's first site: the knowledge that imagination is a way in as well as a way out, that with dreams and daydreams we can elevate ourselves, validate our finest moments, quite literally change our lives.

They invented Britpop – or were, at least, the first band to pick up on the tragedy and rich romance of London (iconography for 20 years (Sleeve notes), "Fox Base Alpha"/lyrics, "London Belongs to Me"). They pioneered this year's easy listening boom, and last year's craze for camp. Through their perpetual insistence that style and substance are inseparable, their obsession with *elsewhere*, their incorrigible romanticism (as distinct from escapism), they have semi-directly influenced Roman (the term "Roman" was actually coined by Etienne manager Martin). By eschewing notions of cool as a checklist, opting instead for a personal aesthetic within which anything that happens to touch you, for whatever (\*\*\*\*ed-up reason, can be considered truly precious and worthwhile, they corrected every wrong turn pop has taken over the last 30 years, made it truly (post) modern once more. In our dreams we shine brighter than seas. Lives studded with sailing and suspense. Saint Etienne are still together.

**ZERO ROOM** 302, Hotel De Tourneffe, Paris. Drunk, and so forth.

## 'ONLY LOVE CAN BREAK YOUR HEART'/'KISS AND MAKE UP'

**TWEE**, throwaway Neil Young song shot through with duo bass and howling, impassioned, mountain keyboarders, twee indie oddity turned Salsoul love anthem. Bob: "Psyche TV had just done 'Only Love', and we thought it was a pretty good idea. This is true, it's just the first time I've been pissed enough to admit it. We saved up 200 quid and went into the studio to do two songs, but we hadn't written any, so we decided on 'Only Love Can Break Your Heart' and 'Kiss And Make Up' by The Field Mice. Pete: "Two milestones in rock." Bob: "We were thinking of doing 'Ambulance Blues' by Neil Young, but it was too long. And it was too difficult." Pete: "Kiss And Make Up? It's a form one of the low points of the compilation."

**UN TUESDAY**, Sam French time. The French government exploded a massive nuclear device inside the Pacific Ocean, drawing condemnation from the governments of the world and sparking huge public protests in battered, sheltered streets that know a thing or two about protest.

## 'NOTHING CAN STOP US'

**ALMOST** psychopatically loved up springtime shuffle, tamely repaid by Blur for "The End". Sarah: "That was the first song we did after 'Join Us'." Pete: "We wrote it when we were young and full of spunk. When we literally thought nothing could stop us." Sarah: "I was very excited and fulfilled when 'Song 1' was happy and naive and a bit nervous." Pete: "As if nothing could stop you." Bob: "...attaining that number 54 chart position." Pete: "Nothing could stop it cracking in at Number 54." Sarah: "Considering that when Blur did it, it cracked in at Number 10 or something." Bob: "Good. To The End can't be more. It's not as if we've never done that in other people's records."

## DEUX

**ONCE**, at a signing session in the Virgin Megastore, sat hungover he wasn't actually looking at the fans. Pete took an LP, noticed Sarah had signed. "You have a lovely LP, I love Sarah..." and amusingly wrote "You have lovely teeth, I love Pete" across the sleeve. Finally glancing up, he noticed that the fan in question had the most automatic, common-splained-out response: a few years in it. The fan walked off in tears. Pete and company's funny messages when asked for a photograph.

## 'JOIN OUR CLUB'

**SWIMMING** through the stormy sky. "Do you believe in magic?" Bob: "Forced into recording a commercial. A side by side, striking corporate new and company."

It was supposed to be a bit tongue-in-cheek. It was supposed to be quite funny. But it was written up as 'elms'!! I mean, considering it was called 'Join Our Club' for God's sake."

Sarah: "It sounded terrible when it came out. That's a remixed version on the LP." Bob: "I remember driving through Kilburn, and hearing it on the 'Evening Session', and all I could hear on the car radio was Sarah singing with this hi-hat going TSSSS! TSSSS! TSSSS! I thought, 'Oh no, we've lost it'." Pete: "We lost it. And never regained it."

## TROIS

**SOMEWHERE** in this town, there's a girl who still loves me. Cool.

## 'PEOPLE GET REAL'

**HONEYED** light-dub carousel. "Don't tell me this is soulful! You have to be kidding me on." Bob: "It's about the way that when people stick to a certain kind of music, like acid jazz, or soul, they're considered 'authentic' and 'real'. People being really paraded about stuff getting taken seriously, whereas, if you don't take yourself too seriously, everyone takes that at face value and thinks you're superficial." Bands like yourselves, or The Caravans, or Pizzicato Five, are considered somehow "contrived" for a certain self-awareness, while Pearl Jam are lauded for some supposed holy autism – as though playing Seventies hard rock were the most natural thing in the world!

"Like The Doors, who everyone thinks are great but they're absolutely preposterous, total shit – and then you think of The Lovin' Spoonful, who were far more imaginative and wrote way more inventive songs, and they're regarded as some kind of comedy group! If you go for this ridiculous authenticity thing, you're allowed to get away with anything."

Pete: "That Jamiroquai song where he goes 'sex/ee/lay-dee' – if we'd written that, we'd have been chased down the street!" Bob: "By sexy ladies. People would've come up to us and said, 'I think I'm gonna squeeze ya'."

## QUATRE

**BOB** remembers watching Culture Club's 'Too Old For The Pops' debut as a teenager: his dad, who could be a little weird about things, became very irate that Boy George was dressed like a woman. Bob began laughing helplessly. His dad, genuinely angry by now, shouted: "You wouldn't be laughing if I came home dressed like that!" Gently, Bob corrected his mistake.

## 'AVENUE'

**SIMPLY** the most beautiful pop recording of the last decade. Bob: "It's everyone's favourite. But I can't believe we put it out as a single – as if they were going to

play it on the radio! We were so bloody cocky! We were so full of ourselves! We'd got to Number 21 and thought, 'Right! Top 10 here we come', and then put THAT out!"

I can never decide on my favourite single of the Nineties: "Avenue" or "Motorcycle Emptiness".

Bob: "Blimey. Those muffled voices in the background are actually me and Pete discussing Manic Street Preachers, left on the track really quietly."

Pete: "But you can't make out the proper words, either."

Bob: "That line at the end? It's 'Oh, the clown's no good'."

Pete: "It was our advice to McDonald's, regarding their then-current advertising campaign."

This is, you know, a joke.

## CINQ

**THE** French government boasts a "Minister For Rock."

Which must be rather like having your parents sitting in the kitchen at your 18th birthday party.

## 'YOU'RE IN A BAD WAY'

**A BIT** rubbish, truth be told.

Sarah: "It was supposed to be a joke, but Alan McGee said 'Brilliant! Got to be an A-side!' And it was our biggest hit."

Bob: "He placed this huge milestone round our necks. Placed a huge albatross round our necks. Hahahahaha! It was a big hit, though, wasn't it?"

Pete: "Albatross? Yeah, it was Number One."

Bob: "No, 'You're In A Bad Way'."

Pete: "You're In A Bad Way? It was our 'Albatross'."

Bob: "It was supposed to be a cheesy Herman's Hermits thing, stupid lyrics and that. We wrote it in about 10 minutes. We were in a big A-ha phase, and we thought it was going to sound like 'Cry Wolf', but instead it sounded like..."

Pete: "Cheese Wolf!"

Bob: "Oh dear."

## SIX

"I KEEP hearing about that line in the Whale song," says Sarah, grimacing ("I can't help that I wanna tumble," Sarah Cracknell up her Channel Tunnel). "It's a bit embarrassing, isn't it? Like, 'She's got a Joe, a Joe like the Mersey Tunnel... I was quite flattered, though'." Pete: "She's deep in thought."

"It's not a very good rhyme, is it?"

Er, no.

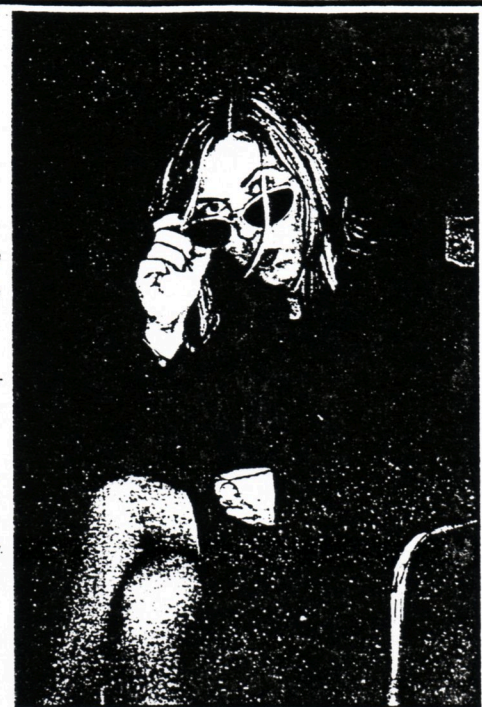
"I suppose I'd be quite worried if there was a song like that about me. 'I can't help that I wanna tumble/Peter Wiggs up his bumhole.' By Metallica."

Bob sits up. "Whole? They're Swedish, aren't they? Like The Cardigans. Like the Mayor Of Norkopping. I heard a great quote from the Mayor Of Norkopping, talking about the Estonia sinking, when 80 pensioners from Norkopping died, he said, 'Well, it's better than if young people had died, isn't it' – they didn't have long to go anyway."

It's as if Swedish people are so tied up with being seen as the most normal people in the world, they've decided to suddenly become as bizarre and offensive as possible. Starting with Whale, The Cardigans, the Mayor Of Norkopping...

Pete: "...and Metallica."

**'HOBART PAVING'** A PIANO ballad, a breath sculpture: "I heard she drove the silver sports car/Through the empty streets last night." Bob: "That was supposed to be a cinematic thing."



**"I can't help that I wanna fumble/Sarah Cracknell up her Channel Tunnel." It's a bit embarrassing, isn't it?**

– Sarah Cracknell on *that* Whale lyric

about American tenement blocks. But it doesn't do that for anyone. So it's not about American tenement blocks at all, do you know what I mean?" "The idea was, she used to live there, but she got rich and moved away, and now she's going back. I got the idea from this horrible Seventies airbrushed painting I saw in a book called 'Rock Dreams' of Diana Ross going back to where she used to live." Pete: "Jarvis does that in Sheffield. He drives round Sheffield in a limo, laughing."

## SEPT

**FRIDAY**, 3pm. "Saint Etienne Danao" gather in a photographer's studio 600 yards from the Eiffel Tower for some French press shots. After half an hour, two armed policemen stroll in through the open door to check things out, and are immediately roped into the shoot. Bemused, they comply. Eventually, enough of enough they step back onto the street, forgetting to remove their make-up.

## 'WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?'

**HOT** Manhattan by helicopter. Almost innocently enormous. Bob: "A genius song by a horrible cabaret group who won 'Opportunity Knocks' about 10 times in a row." Sarah: "They sent us a bunch of flowers."

## HUIT

**ONCE**, before a show in Japan. Sarah asked a friend for the Japanese word for "Cheers!", which she then memorised. That night, after the first song, she turned to the crowd and shouted "Cheers!" Unfortunately, owing to a slight mispronunciation, thousands of Japanese fans were treated to a smiling Sarah shouting "Tits!" Apparently, they looked "confused".

**'I WAS BORN ON CHRISTMAS DAY'** **SWEET**, slight festive duet with Charlatan Tim. "Never could have been a tennis wife/Get into the acting life."

Sarah: "I met Tim Burgess in Manchester, and he was such a lovely bloke. I had a bit of a crush on him for a while, actually, but I grew out of that. So anyway... we ruined his career."

Bob: "We were thinking of getting Derma from Northside to do it... when you're in a pop group, you want to do a Christmas single, don't you? It wasn't a big hit, was it? Mariah Carey blew us out of the water really, with her festive tune."



**'We wrote it when we were young and full of spunk. When we literally thought nothing could stop us'**

– Pete Wiggs on 'Nothing Can Stop Us'



"It's our 'Happy Xmas (War Is Over)', I remember when I was a kid and 'Happy Xmas War Is Over' came out, I remember I thought it was by Jack Lemmon. Like it was the theme from some Vietnam film he'd been in or something."

## NEUF

**FRIDAY**, 5.45 pm: An Islamic terrorist group explode a huge incendiary device in the centre of Paris, bringing six major roads to a standstill.

## 'PALE MOVIE'

**MOPEDS** cutting through the Basque country, holiday romance: "In the bed where they make love, she's in a film on the sheets."

Pete: "Spanish folk. We wrote it so we could go to Spain for the video. It kind of annoys me, actually. It was potentially brilliant, but we stuck a little rigidity to our folk idea. I remember doing it on 'Top Of The Pops' and having serious doubts. A bit of a failure."

## DIX

**AT 18**. Pete went on an inter-railing holiday. Reaching Jerusalem, he got on a bus carrying, perhaps stupidly, a German supermarket carrier bag. A few miles down the road, a woman leant over and said something he didn't understand.

"Sorry," replied Pete. "I didn't catch that."

"So," she screamed. "You're saying the Holocaust never happened?"

"No!" stammered Pete, panicking - thinking he meant no it never happened, she became hysterical, pointed at him, turned to the other passengers and began screaming: "Nazis! Nazis!"

Pete got off at the next stop.

## 'LIKE A MOTORWAY'

**BIZARRE** Teutonic disco stomp. Sounds like a row of moths. "I saw her skin. Smelled just like pebbles."

Bob: "Number 47 with a bullet. The Americans tried to get us to change the title to 'Like A Freeway'! Can you believe it? We said 'Autobahn' was a hit all round the world, it's off."

Was it supposed to be a Shadow Morton/Shangri-Las style death song?

Pete: "Yeah. Or 'Ring A Ring O' Roses'. Folk songs about death and destruction."

Bob: "Tiger Bay" was supposed to be an album of modern folk songs done in 20th century styles like techno and dub. So we wrote most of it in the Forest Of Dean. We went into the country to get our heads together. We wanted to do loads of songs about death, so we bought the local papers to get some real stories, and there was nothing. Then the week after we moved out, they discovered the bodies in Cromwell Road!"

Pete: "Little did we know that our friend Fred, who'd lent us his cottage, was such a bad man."

## ONZE

**FRIDAY**, 6.15: I ride in a taxi with Etienne Daho, Saint Etienne's French (erm) collaborator to a Paris radio studio. We arrive along the Left Bank. Etienne tells me about his one-time friendship with Nico, and makes me promise to send him a video copy of Andy Warhol's 'The Chelsea Girls', which he has never seen. One of the most pleasant men I have ever met.

## 'HUG MY SOUL'

**UNDERRATED** hopschotch Europop classic, with a rather sweet video. In which Sarah wanks off a bear.

Sarah: "We didn't authorise that bit! It was a joke and a laugh. And it all went horribly wrong. I looked nice, though."

Well, you play a small girl with bunches who gets kidnapped by a bear, at which point you transform into a slinky siren, and... uh... wank him off.

Bob: "Did you enjoy the video, though?"

Pete: "Wasn't that what the song suggested to you?"

Mmm. The first time I heard it, I immediately thought of Sarah pulling off a grizzly.

Sarah: "It was Steven Wells who directed that, a fine upstanding left-wing journalist."

Pete: "Yeah, the bear represented capitalism."

And Sarah wanked it off."

Bob: "It was about the decline of the Soviet Union. The Russian bear reduced to such an ignominious role."

Sarah: "It was originally called 'Hug My Solzhentstyn'."

## DOUZE

**SAINT Etienne** are still together.

## 'HE'S ON THE PHONE'

**THE** new single: "Got the cash/Feeling flash/In Leicester Square."

Sarah: "Guest vocals by Etienne Daho, Nicest Man In Pop."

Bob: "He's so stupidly famous here, he can't walk down the street. And no one's ever heard of him outside France. I can't think of any British stars like that."

Cliff Richard?

Pete: "Robson & Jerome."

## FIN

**BECAUSE** things really are what they seem at 17. Because there is no underground. Because now is the right time; because a heart in two parts is better than one. Because we're in this thing together.

Five years gone, and Saint Etienne are still overdoing on their own imagination, still ablaze at the window, a swan surfing the slicks; still capable, through their verve and vision and their warm continuous dreaming and their wild and deep romance, of changing your life, forever, for the better (more salt more pepper!) the instant that you understand.

"Get on the floor and look real... sexy."

Because I say so?

The Very Best Pop Group In The World.

## ETIENNE DAHO: AN INTRODUCTION



"I AM a French singer. I am a Capricorn. I think this is very important. I used to be singer for a band called Marquis De Sade. I started to become famous. I became huge in 1986. I have been described as a weirdo, a pop star, very normal and not normal. I went to see Saint Etienne in Paris. I liked them very much, but stood behind a pillar and could not see them properly because I am not very tall. Bob had read my book

about Francoise Hardy. He gave me a tape of a demo, and I wrote a melody for it. To celebrate, we went to the pub and drank. When we were drunk, things became very intelligent. We decided to release 'He's On The Phone' in England. It is all just for fun. I am not a great singer. But I like my voice. I am 39. If you think I look young, then that must be all the excesses. I expect one day soon it will be like Dorian Grey. I will wake up looking like a satyr. I have lived in London for six months. I am most looking forward to possibly appearing on 'Top Of The Pops'."

The compilation, 'Too Young To Die', is released by Heavenly on November 13. A new single, 'He's On The Phone', is released on October 30



ANDY WILL SHER

Musical Express

**SAINT ETIENNE** are back with a new single and album. The single, "He's On The Phone", is released by Heavenly on October 30. It comes as an EP with three new B-sides and an EP of remixes.

The single is a taster for "Too Young To Die", a compilation LP of all the Saint Etienne singles, released by Heavenly on November 13.

The Saint Etienne line-up (below) of Sarah Cracknell, Bob Stanley and Pete Wiggs remains together. They are recording together with French pop star Etienne Daho. Meanwhile, Sarah is working on her first solo album, while Bob and Pete are collaborating with Shara Nelson and Stakka Bo. They also promise "a new project cloaked in mystery, murder and suspense". (See feature, pages 12 to 14.)

