

London Conversations

'The neighborhood that I live in,
I've always seen as home.
At certain times of the evening,
it's like a no-go zone.

Got cash in my pocket to last the weekend.
And I've got features I quite like
and don't mind keeping.

But I still walk the side streets home,
even when I'm on my own.
If I let myself believe all the bad press
and horror stories,
I wouldn't set a foot outside'.

Side Streets Tales From Turnpike House 2005

Never mind the house prices or the gentrification, London is and always has been a tough, dirty city. It's hard to get around and claustrophobic: the nearest proper country is at least an hour away. While New York's bedrock granite and relentless grid system promotes clear thought and precise action, London's clay basin can make you feel like you're slowly suffocating.

But the metropolis can also offer untold personal and material riches. It's a place of transformation, a magnet for people all over these islands and the wider world, a haven for the refugee fleeing small town brutality - and far worse. Some disappear, many struggle and a few, a very few attain their dreams. Most achieve some equilibrium.

Even though London is a place of extremes, heaven and hell, love and poison, it tunes the emotions to a high pitch: you can switch from top of the world to suicidal - or homicidal - within an instant. Much of this is due to the single biggest change that has hit the metropolis in the last thirty years, which is in part a measure of its success: the enormous increase in its population.

Above all, London is a dynamic world city: a huge infernal engine dominating the lives of all who live there. Its volatile psychic shifts are matched by the constant physical change: of shop fronts, buildings, and whole neighbourhoods. It needs a strong constitution to keep up with these demands, and London has become a place of and for the young.

But what happens when you're no longer teenage in body or spirit? For many people, London life is a series of negotiations, a round of small pleasures set against harsh conditions. The huge, sprawling behemoth is cut down to size by habit and necessity into a series of villages, personalised pathways through the dangers and temptations of the big black smoke.

This is the territory that Saint Etienne have obsessively mapped since the early 1990s. From the euphoric beat of "London Belongs To Me" to the gritty determination of "Side Streets" and the hopeful futurism of "This Is Tomorrow", the trio of Bob Stanley, Pete Wiggs and Sarah Cracknell have tracked - in words, music, film and distilled emotion - the moods and the changes of the capital.

Pulling together 36 songs from an eighteen year-old odyssey across several different record labels, "London Conversations" travels from blissful baggy ecstasy through breakbeat Rap ("Filthy"), proto-Britpop and early folk-tronica to a dalliance with the brilliant 21st century pop machine, Xenomania and beyond. This is the secret history of the city that they love.

'June 4th, 1989: Primrose Hill, Staten Island, Chalk Farm, Massif Central, Gospel Oak, Sao Paolo, Boston Manor, Costa Rica, Arnos Grove, San Clemente, Tufnell Park, Gracetown, York Way, Videoton, Clerkenwell, Portobello, Maida Vale, Old Ford, Valencia, Kennington, Galveston, Holland

Park, Studamer, Dollis Hill, Fougères, London Fields, Bratislava, Haggerston, Livigno, Canonbury, Alice Springs, Tooting Graveney, Baffin Island, Pollard's Hill, Winnepeg, Plumstead Common, Hyderabad, Silver-town, Buffalo'.

Girl VII Foxbase Alpha 1991

The name came first. In the early 80s, Croydon schoolmates Bob Stanley and Pete Wiggs would commandeer the record player in the sixth form common room and - before the lads arrived, demanding Metal or The Jam - managed to shoot a game or two of pool and play their recent acquisitions: Joy Division, The Fall, Felt and early Postcard. Out of this came an idea of a perfect pop group, named after the glamorous French football team.

By the time that the duo came to make the move from concept to actuality, the technology favoured them. If you were trying to form a band in the punk period, you had to buy instruments and travel up and down the motorway to play live in real time in front of gobbing audiences - nice! Although the audiences had calmed down, this model still held sway through post punk, early indie and C-86.

By the late 80s, there were cheap Akai samplers and synths. Inspired by acid house, Bob and Pete began by playing around with loops and samples, initially using two wired-up cassette recorders and a single record deck. They decided to cover Neil Young's "Ambulance Blues" but it was too wordy, so they opted for "Only Love Can Break Your Heart" instead - co-opting Moira Lambert of shoe-gazers Faith Over Reason as guest vocalist.

Encouraged by the Grid's Richard Norris - currently with mash-up psychers Beyond The Wizard's Sleeve - Saint Etienne found that putting a record out was surprisingly easy: they hooked up with local Croydon producer Ian Catt and then played the results to Jeff Barrett (who was then working as a publicist for, among others, Factory Records) in a Shepherd's Bush pub. 'He told us he was starting a new label and said, "Can I put this out?" We said yes, of course. It was that simple.'

The second release on the fledgling Heavenly Records, "Only Love Can Break Your Heart" had an impact beyond its immediate sales - although it did

make the top 40 when re-released a year or so later. The timing was perfect: it was at the height of baggy, and both Saint Etienne and Camden's Flowered Up were seen as the London wing of the Manchester based movement.

The group's reputation was enhanced by a great Andrew Weatherall remix of "Only Love Can Break Your Heart" and a strong second single, "Kiss and Make Up" - with Donna Savage. But the band really clicked when Sarah Cracknell joined for the third single: 'she came through the Boy's Own connection', Bob and Pete remember; 'she was a friend of Selina (cover star of "Foxbase Alpha") and had gone out with Lawrence from Felt who was involved with the Windsor and Slough scene.'

'When I joined,' Sarah recalls, 'they had a plan to use different singers for each song. It would have been a logistical nightmare. But we got on really well, we really clicked: we had the same reference points from our teens. As far as the singing went, I was very aware of not belting songs out. My first influences were Debbie Harry and Elizabeth Fraser of the Cocteau Twins. You've got to find your own style, your own sound.'

'The writing together was very organic. As soon I came forward with an idea, they were very open, not controlling at all. They're such pop fans that if the song was good, they went for it. I'd written songs before Saint Etienne, but I began writing about imaginary people in imaginary situations. I wasn't autobiographical at all. Also using melancholy, our favourite emotion. It goes very well with stark electronic backing.'

Sarah also added an appropriately Honor Blackman-like glamour to the group. 'I'd been going to jumble sales and buying vintage clothes since I was 13, and when I got a bit older I was always getting the train into town and going to places like Kensington Market. When I joined the band, I was already wearing the right clothes - with a definite nod to the sixties'.

The first fruit of this collaboration was the perennially popular "Nothing Can Stop Us" in early 1991: 'it was the first song we ever wrote: we based the structure on a track by De La Soul, adding a Dusty Springfield sample. We'd never expected anything to happen with "Only Love Can Break Your Heart"

and Jeff said we had to do a new single quickly. It felt surprisingly natural to start writing.'

What with the reissue of their first 45 and a top ten single under the name of Cola Boy, "7 Ways To Love", 1991 was a busy year for Saint Etienne. The highpoint was the release of their first album, "Foxbase Alpha", a classic psych-pop confection with a dizzying array of samples from Hollywood films and decimal coinage records, culminating in the deep ambient immersion of "Like The Swallow".

And the chart positions kept on going up and up. The album was Mercury-nominated and went top 40, while the next single "Join Our Club", nudged the top twenty. With lyric references to songs as diverse as "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and "Purple Haze", it was 'a heavier, clubbier sound', remembers Pete; 'we were listening to the stuff coming out on R&S and a lot of Detroit techno X-102's "Rings of Saturn" was a favourite.'

It was followed by one of their most haunting melodies, "Avenue". With its bittersweet lyric and unusual length, it stalled at number 40: 'at seven minutes, nobody was going to play it on the radio. We were definitely going for a Jimmy Webb style multi-part song structure and ornate production. We sampled the mellotron off the Bee Gees "Horizontal".

By now, the Saint Etienne patch was well established. Bright psych-tinged pop with deceptively breezy vocals. 'The words were a proper collaboration between the three of us. Our approach and treatment was quite light, but there was plenty of melancholy. We were heavily influenced by the "Twin Peaks" soundtrack, the Julee Cruise album. I remember trying to get the atmosphere of the Paris Sisters records. And we were just discovering all the 60's French girl singers beyond Françoise Hardy'.

This phase of Saint Etienne crystallised on the next 45, "You're In A Bad Way" which, with its affirmative lyrics and relentless production, reached number 12. 'We got Alan Tarney in, who had produced A-Ha and many of Cliff's hits, to mix the single: he made Sarah stand on an X he wrote on the floor. It was our first full pop production, and came out during a great period of Top 40 Europop'.

The concept had become real. Saint Etienne were bona fide pop stars. 'That was fantastic, unbelievably exciting. Our songs were being played on "Eastenders" and "Grange Hill". We went on "Top of the Pops": we were on the show in February 1993, with Rolf Harris, East 17 and 2 Unlimited' (then cresting with their immortal "No Limits").

The album version of "You're In A Bad Way" begins with a sample from the 1963 film of "Billy Liar": 'Of course London's a big place. It's a very big place, Mr Shadrack. A man could lose himself in London. Lose himself. Lose himself. Lose himself in London!' This widescreen approach was explored on the group's second album, "So Tough", which was 'the soundtrack to an imaginary movie'.

With found sound and snippets from the soundtracks of, inter alia, "Peeping Tom" "That'll Be The Day" and "Lord Of The Flies", "So Tough" included three top 40 hits - including the double A side that pitted the rain-flecked ballad "Hobart Paving" against the US dance chart hit "Who Do You Think You Are" (a duet with Debsey Wykes, and a title later appropriated by the Spice Girls) - and reached number 7 in the album charts.

But Saint Etienne were coming to the limits of their founding aesthetic: 'it was costing us more to clear samples than it was to actually record the album. There was a lot of dialogue on "So Tough" and it was very difficult to get the permissions. We then entered a phase of not using samples, partly to make things more interesting for ourselves.

This change was made manifest on the next album, 1994's "Tiger Bay" which offered a much more pastoral mood - signalled by a decidedly pastoral cover modelled on a 19th century painting by James Clarke Cook ("Welcome Bonny Boat").

Inside were twelve slices of pioneering folk-tronica: 'almost all of the melodies were based in traditional folk songs. Aside from bonecrunching techno we were listening to Pentangle and Fairport Convention at the time, and we wanted to create something like a latterday Liege And Lief. We even rented a middle-of-nowhere cottage in the Forest Of Dean to write it, checked the visitors' book, and discovered the last person who had stayed there was Bill Drummond.'

Like its predecessor, "Tiger Bay" went top ten. It included three top 50 hits, all of which are included here: "Pale Movie", "Like A Motorway" - a high spot with its techno crackle and telling lyric: 'She said her life was like a motorway: Dull, grey, and long 'til he came along' - and the Sarah Cracknell penned "Hug My Soul".

It seemed like business as usual, but Bob and Pete now see this period as a dip: 'People really hated the "Tiger Bay" cover, I remember Brett Anderson asking us what it was all about, which should have given us a clue. Alan McGee was having a breakdown - and Creation (who distributed Saint Etienne at this point) was going into chaos'.

'We were also getting a bit tetchy with each other after working really hard for the previous three years. When we toured "Tiger Bay", we did a lot of festivals, so we were behaving like a rock band or at least how we imagined rock bands to behave. (When we met a lot of rock bands, we realised they weren't like that). But we could understand why bands split up after touring or discovered religion'.

However the end of this phase was marked by their biggest hit to date. With another London lyric - 'got the cash, feeling flash in Leicester Square' - and a full-blown Euro feel (thanks in part to collaborator Etienne Daho), the stand-alone single "He's On The Phone" went to number 11 in December 1995. Saint Etienne were back on top.

'It was the first time we'd worked with Brian Higgins (formerly of Motiv8, now of Xenomania). His studio was really state of the art. He pulled the song apart. It was one time where we knew it was a huge hit, and it felt brilliant to be back on "Top of the Pops".

Despite this, the group went into hiatus for three years. Sarah recorded her solo album "Lipslide", while Bob and Pete set up their own label, EMIdisc: 'we signed Kenickie and Denim, but just missed out on Broadcast. We also started a weekly club night in west London called Don't Laugh, and we were regulars at the Heavenly Social. They were our wilderness years. The time flew by'.

The gap was filled by compilations: the Japan-only "Continental" (which mopped up their intermittent recordings), the singles best of "Too Young To Die"

(which went gold) and, best of all, the triple vinyl and two CD collection of remixes "Casino Classics". This compiled mixes by a roll call of cutting edge dance artists: Aphex Twin, Andrew Weatherall, The Chemical Brothers, David Holmes, Underworld and Balearico - whose "Burnt Out Car" is remixed and represented here.

When Saint Etienne returned to the fray, the climate was very different. 'Britpop had grown really irritating. We liked Denim, Earl Brutus and Pulp - those aspects of British culture - but we missed out riding on the coat-tails of that boom. It wasn't a bad thing, ultimately. While groups like Cast and Space were the end result of Britpop we were in love with this crisp new wave of pop coming out of Scandinavia. So it seemed like a good time to leave the country.'

The group travelled to Tambourine Studios in Malmo, Sweden, to record their next album, "Good Humor". The first single, "Sylvie", was another slice of teenage melodrama - with an echo of "I Saw Her Standing There": 'seventeen, high-school queen' - and returned the group to the top twenty; a second 45, "The Bad Photographer", also charted well.

"Good Humor" convincingly repositioned the group - it went top 20 in late 1998 and became their biggest seller in the US - but Creation was dissolving; they quickly signed to Beggars Banquet. 'We had always been on an independent label in Britain and they were one of the last still standing'.

The booklet for "Good Humor" contained a wonderful selection of urban photographs - by Martin Parr, Leonard Freed and others. Saint Etienne's preoccupation with urbanism continued on their first album for Beggars Banquet, "Sound Of Water". The second single, "Heart Failed (In The Back Of A Taxi)" offered a cautionary tale of the fate that befalls greedy developers.

The band fondly remember the album: 'it was a lot of fun. We recorded it in Berlin, working with To Rococo Rot. We were listening to loads of the new electronica from Britain, Germany and California, which seemed more engaging and adventurous than what was coming out of the dance scene'. The result was at once sparse, accomplished and

avant-garde: from the tough, guitar grooves of "Boy Is Crying" (a top 40 hit) to the nine-minute epic, "How We Used To Live".

After this Continental interlude, Saint Etienne returned to the source for their next project, "Finisterre". It started in 2001: 'we began filming bits of London we knew and liked. It was at the height of the boom, and lots of cranes were going up then. We wanted to concentrate on odd buildings and the spaces in between: mainly postwar architecture and concrete, brutalist stuff from the 50s and 60s'.

Directed by Paul Kelly and Kieran Evans, and with narration by Michael Jayston (best known for his role in "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy" but now on your TV with a starring slot in "Emmerdale"), "Finisterre" mixed reminiscences by Shena McKay, Vashti Bunyan and Vic Godard among others with a Saint Etienne score. A model exercise in psychogeography, it is also a historical record, as much of what it documented has already gone.

For the soundtrack album - a long-held ambition finally achieved - the group returned to Ian Catt and Brian Higgins. The first single, "Action" began with a psychogeographical statement of intent - 'drift along, drift along'. Despite a production that rang as clear as a bell and a wry lyric that had some of the feeling of the Beach Boys' "Do It Again", it stalled at 41.

With a guest rap/vocal by Wildflower, second single "Soft Like Me" was a plea - rare enough in the midst of lad culture - for one man in particular (and men in general) to be 'expressive not aggressive', indeed to embrace their feminine, 'soft' side. The healing power of water is celebrated on the limpid "Summerisle" and the promo single "Shower Scene", with its glistening guitar break.

With linking snippets from Jayston - his ultra-English voice reminiscent of Nigel Terry's narration in Derek Jarman's "The Last of England" - the album "Finisterre" presented a view of the city that, although realistic, was explicitly hopeful: as Sarah Churchill intones on the title track, 'I believe that music in the long run can straighten out most things.'

Lest we forget that Bob Stanley is also a great pop critic, "Finisterre" contained some good

side-swipes: 'there are too many bands that act lame, sound tame'. Or: 'I believe in Donovan over Dylan, of love over cynicism'. And that sense of possibility, of enthusiasm retained against the odds extended to the metropolis itself: 'I love the feeling of being slightly lost, to find new spaces, new routes, new areas'.

This mood continued on Saint Etienne's next record, 2005's "Tales From Turnpike House". The Beggars Banquet deal was over and the group had signed to Sanctuary. The idea was to represent 'a microcosm of London. Lots of our songs had been about London and we decided to stop being indirect and make the city the theme of an album that hung together properly'.

Most records about London describe its high or low life: the Kinks' "Big Black Smoke" or Donovan's "Sunny South Kensington" to name but two. In contrast, the "Tales From Turnpike House" - an imaginary block of flats - are not afraid to deal with everyday lives, whether it be the Unigate employee immortalised on "Milk Bottle Symphony" or the jack-the-lad in "Last Orders For Gary Stead".

There is the memorable image, in "Teenage Winter", of mums with pushchairs outside Sainsbury's crying for their lost youth: 'Their old 45s gathering dust, the birthday cards they couldn't face throwing away'. On the first single, the bossa-nova "Side Streets", Sarah Cracknell exudes a quiet determination to get on with her life in her home city, ignoring the fear spread by the mass media.

Then there is the search for space in "Stars Above Us" or "Relocate", a duet between Sarah and David Essex that gets to the heart of the subject: do you move to the country 'for some open space and a change of pace' or would it drive you crazy? Even crazier than the city makes you? The argument goes round and round and is not resolved.

While many of their friends are fleeing or have fled, Saint Etienne remain upbeat about London: 'there was a period in the mid 90s when the city seemed really gloomy. Queuing for night buses. In the last ten years it's changed for the better. We used to master our records in Broadway Market, in Hackney, when it was fifty per cent derelict - now it's unrecognisable. There's more people on the

streets, but far less old people, which is a little unnerving. It's become an international youth city.'

Even though their records now make the top 40 rather than the top 20, Saint Etienne 'keep working together because there's still so much to do. We've been artists in residence at the South Bank; we've got the reissue label, Eclipse; there's the Croydon book (a psychogeography of that fair suburb, with Johan Kugelberg), and the new film. We'll record songs every so often'.

'At the moment, we're working at a slower pace,' adds Sarah. 'I'm contented with that. We've always got on very well, there are no cross words, no disagreements. Saint Etienne is like one of those machines that needs all three parties to work well. The desperation to go Top Ten has gone. We're still wanting to try out new things, we're still enjoying the process'.

"London Conversations" finishes with the brand-new "This Is Tomorrow": hard-won optimism in a fizzing electro setting. It's the title theme to the most recent Saint Etienne movie about the Royal Festival Hall and the 1951 Festival of Britain exhibition - an optimistic projection into a future that never quite happened, even though it continues to thrive as a cultural zone.

"This Is Tomorrow" also references a future that did happen, beyond its originators' wildest dreams: the famous 1956 Independent Group show at the ICA that launched British Pop Art. But then Saint Etienne - for all their love of the past, have always been futuristic and forward-looking. They are British Pop's last great modernists, and their newest song is nothing less than a manifesto for their whole career: 'Tomorrow's come today: that's what we're here to say'.

A note about notes:

Saint Etienne have always taken great care with their packaging and sleeve design: each album is what the Germans call a *gesamtkunstwerke* - a total artwork.

The sleeve notes have always been an integral part of the package, and there are several very fine examples of this underrated genre by Douglas Coupland ("Good Humor"), Mark Perry

("Finisterre"), Simon Reynolds ("The Sound of Water"), and Jeremy Deller ("Tales From Turnpike House") among others.

I'm very pleased to renew my association with Bob Pete and Sarah and hope that you enjoy listening to the records as much as I have. Stay busy, out of phase, in love.

JON SAVAGE July 2008

