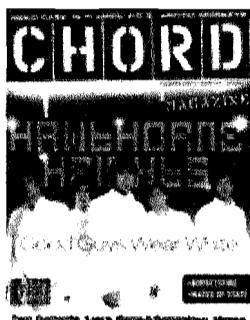



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BELLE AND SEBASTIAN

Pop, Longevity, and the Pursuit of Variance

By Garin Pirnia

The name Belle and Sebastian may not ring any bells unless you're the kind of individual who wears anoraks and recognizes the word "twee" as a genre of music unrelated to Baby Gap. For more than a decade, this Glasgow-based outfit has been writing songs about school kids, teenage crushes and piety, recorded against dulcet orchestrations and the ingenuous vocals of lead singer Stuart Murdoch. With seven members strong, Belle and Sebastian has become more than just a band.

"It's much more of a collective now," says guitarist/vocalist Stevie Jackson. "When we started, we were kind of the back-up to Stuart. That's now a long time ago."

Jackson has been with the band from its indie beginnings back in 1996, when Stuart Murdoch put the band together for a school project. The group's seminal album, *Tigermilk*, introduced the twee sensibilities that would segue into its follow-up the same year, the impeccable and most beloved *If You're Feeling Sinister*. The latter has since become an iconic album imbedded in minds of hipsters young and old because of its innocent narratives on boy/girl relationships and infectious musical arrangements. (Spin named it one of the greatest albums of the past 20 years.)

In 2003, the cadre released *Dear Catastrophe Waitress*, a more democratic album that fused together the various band members' creative ideas. The song "I'm a Cuckoo" became the group's biggest hit yet. Despite being a constant force in the ever-mercurial tarmac of indie rock, Belle and Sebastian has eluded mainstream success, especially in the States. It's always been right on the periphery of breaking through its esoteric status, always on the cusp of something larger.

"It would be great to be big stars, but that probably would've happened by now," says Jackson.

With its seventh full-length, *The Life Pursuit*, Belle and Sebastian proves once again why it's the best damn band every music lover needs to hear.

"It's our most projected record," comments Jackson. "I'm glad the record has a special identity to it. It's a collection of styles."

Those styles he speaks of range from blues to '70s-driven soul and balladry, with some pop thrown in for good measure. The song "Another Sunny Day" has twangy and lush sounds that unfurl into the band's signature tinge of melancholy. "I thought it was for real; babies, rings and fools kneeling / And words of pledging trust and lifetimes stretching forever / So what went wrong?" sings Murdoch, showcasing the band's maturing themes. Songs like "White Collar Boy" and "The Blues Are Still Blue" channel funk, while the dual vocals of "Dress Up in You" offer a softer side. "We Are the Sleepyheads" borders on psychedelic sensibilities, with its echoing vocals and a perpetually churning bass.

The Life Pursuit offers an amalgam of voices and collaboration from each band member, demonstrative of the group's ever-evolving sound.

"I think the new record is one of the best things we've done. It's got enthusiasm and seems like our first record, not our [seventh]," says Jackson.

Any marginally successful group with longevity seemingly invites critics and fans to scrutinize its music quality. Reviews of aging bands often include comments about unmet expectations and possibly progression into undesirable musical directions. But, everyone has an opinion, and as Jackson says, he doesn't want to keep repeating the same output.

"Not only does the band change, but the listener does as well. In 1996, a fan could've been 22 years old, and now they are 32 years old with a family. It's complex."

Throughout its tenure, Jackson says the dynamic of the band has changed, with certain members being more interested in participating in other aspects such as merchandising, the technicalities of recording, and photography. And like life itself, the band has altered with the passing years.

"It's like anything in life - everything changes. In 10 years, anyone's life changes. Just ask anyone you see on the street," remarks Jackson. "When we started, the age difference was more distant. Myself and Stuart were in our 20s, and the youngest were teenagers. Then, it seemed like a big difference, but as you grow older, you get closer in age. There was a period of uncertainty for years where we weren't communicating well. It's more fun now. There's no nostalgia or desire to go back to that time. Now seems more constructive and interesting."

In any creative profession, it's imperative to make money off the craft while staying true to oneself and pursuing the dream. This could be one reason why the band has remained an intact and formidable group.

"If we cared [only] about money, we'd do things differently. It's not about money. I like money, I'm fond of it, but it's not about it," states Jackson. He goes on to say that he'd like to reach more people, though.

From the luster of *If You're Feeling Sinister* to the splendor of *The Boy With the Arab Strap* and the eclecticism of last year's EP compilation, *Push Barman to Open Old Wounds*, Jackson says *Tigermilk* has been his band's favorite album.

"First love never dies. It's like a first kiss. There was a certain magic to it. It was the most concentrated and joyful."

For a band to endure even a decade is quite impressive, especially with the initial lineup hardly changing. Their secret lies in this: "Don't look at trends. One should forget about what everyone else is doing," advises Jackson. "One should develop an individual voice and go for it. It's more important to concentrate on what you are as an individual, like a musician, songwriter, etc."

And maybe with *The Life Pursuit*, Belle and Sebastian will finally convert a few new fans to accompany them on the joyous ride through their world of pop perfection.

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