Belle & Sebastian – Bio

*How To Solve Our Human Problems* Parts 1, 2 & 3 on Matador Records

A new Belle and Sebastian release is always something to cheer. So three new releases leads to the inevitable conclusion: three cheers! Here is the latest installment in a career that has always pursued a singular and delightful vision of what pop represents and what it can achieve, a career that has seen them triumph against the odds to win a Brit award, be one of the first bands to curate their own festival, and play at the official London residence of the US ambassador (the last president’s ambassador, not the current one’s).

“My capacity to be delighted by pop music has not waned,” Stuart Murdoch – lead singer, main songwriter, player of piano and guitar – says. His love of pop is conveyed by the fact that Belle and Sebastian’s new music has the timeless blend of joy and melancholy that has always characterised them. What has changed is how the group want their music to be released. Over the coming months, Belle and Sebastian will gift the world a double album’s worth of music – richly melodic, deliciously literate, as gentle as a summer stream but as insistent as a river – but they won’t do it by releasing an album. Instead, there will be three EPs, under the umbrella title *How To Solve Our Human Problems*.

“We’d made a couple of LPs, *Tigermilk* and *If You’re Feeling Sinister*, within the space of six months,” Murdoch says, remembering the early days of the band’s career, and how that fed into their decision-making this time. “I thought somebody was going to take the keys to the studio away, and I wanted to record as many songs as I could. I remembered the Smiths talking about how important non-album singles were to them, so we thought: ‘Why don’t we record a bunch of songs and then pick three A-sides and rally around those.” The results were the EPs *Dog on Wheels*, *Lazy Line Painter Jane* *and 3.. 6.. 9 Seconds of Light* EPs.

So when Belle and Sebastian felt new music percolating within them, they decided to break from the working methods of the recent years and instead stay at home, record the tracks as and when, often producing themselves, working with friends and collaborators to see what emerged. Working in Glasgow gave them the freedom to work without the constraints that making an album can impose: they could take their time honing and experimenting.

Just as those three early EPs are at the very heart of the Belle and Sebastian canon, so these three new releases deserve to be treated not as a stopgap, but as definitive releases in their own right. *How To Solve Our Human Problems* is both an era of its own, and part of a long, rich history. *How To Solve Our Human Problems* is, if you like, Belle and Sebastian Redux.

The lead tracks for the EPs work in their different ways. ‘We Were Beautiful’ is built around a drumbeat Murdoch imagined, with semi spoken-word verses over melancholic synths and pedal steel, and a Peter Hookesque bassline. And, as Murdoch self-effacingly puts it, “a vague chorus”. It’s not a vague chorus: it’s a big, bold chorus.

‘I’ll Be Your Pilot’ is one for the old guard, the essence of the groups dedicated attention to melody (“If there was a line where you could describe our work as challenging, this is on the non-challenging side,” says Murdoch, never a man to knowingly oversell his work), and taking as its subject Murdoch’s young son: “Having your first kid is a huge event, so I wrapped a lot of things I felt about Denny into the song. Being a dad made me feel a little like the pilot in The Little Prince, hence all the references to the Sahara!”

The third “single”, ‘Poor Boy’, is the most unusual: as close as Belle and Sebastian will ever come to slinky, 80s R&B. “At the last minute we had the chance to work with Inflo [who produced Michael Kiwanuka’s acclaimed Love & Hate],” Murdoch says. “I wasn’t sure getting into bed with someone new at that point in the project would be helpful, but he came up to Glasgow, and we had a lot of fun together”. The result is, flatly, wonderful: recognisably Belle and Sebastian, but pushed into new shapes, configured in a new way. Inflo also worked ‘Show Me the Sun’, which isn’t quite so much of a sidestep, but still propels Belle and Sebastian gently towards the dancefloor.

Murdoch, as ever, is not the only writer. Sarah Martin (violin/vocals) brought in the delicious ‘The Same Star’, which marries Belle and Sebastian’s melodiousness to a pounding Motown backbeat, and was produced by Leo Abrahams (Ghostpoet, Wild Beasts, Regina Spektor). “It fell together quite quickly,” says Martin, “thanks in large part to Bob’s [Bobby Kildea, guitarist] enthusiasm and Stuart's willingness to dismember an old song and repurpose the break, so that it wasn't just the same three chords over and over and over.”

The multi-part ‘Cornflakes’, which traverses 60’s psychedelia and ecstatic, funk-infused doo-wop, came from Stevie Jackson (guitar/vocals). He cites, cryptically, a range of inspirations for the song: “Getting a whiff of Nancy Whiskey O whilst chatting to the queen of Australia and lifting chords from Frank Sinatra. Sumner, Valli and Collins get the karaoke treatment in quick session, without winning any prizes. Synthetic train music recorded at the Green Door Glasgow who are very talented and gracious people.”

One thing that has defined Belle and Sebastian has been their relationship with fans, and that’s apparent in the new EPs. For the three sleeves, the group issued a call to fans to come to be photographed by Murdoch at a studio in Belsize Park in north London. Fifty were selected, and all those photographed were also recorded answering the question: “How do you solve your human problems?”

These days, Murdoch accepts, the band’s relationship with their fans is “very comfortable”. They’re now seeing a second generation – the children of their original fans, kids who’ve found them as the internet has opened up the whole of pop history. But in the past few years, he has started thinking about his own responsibilities to those fans. “I do feel it’s not just about the music anymore, and it shouldn’t be. You have this platform to spread good vibrations. Life is short! What are we doing here? Are we becoming better people?”

So, in these troubled times, what does that mean? Making pronouncements from the stage and in song? No, Murdoch says, even though Belle and Sebastian have always been a de facto “political” band simply through their fierce independence and DIY ethic. “It’s so easy to get up and condemn this politician or that act. But now I have this intrinsic notion that anger is a bad thing. So how do you respond to what’s happening in the world? What’s happening in the world has always happened. There’s always been cause to be angry. So let’s consider not being angry. And I find myself saying these things on stage in front of people, and flowing with a certain amount of lucidity.”

There’s nothing wrong with gentleness, is there? It shouldn’t be confused with passivity.

“I would agree. It would be easy to give up that gentleness, ’cos on the surface it has brought us nothing but bootings from the man-in-the-street. Our records never leap out at you. But, in time, you hope some people would quietly be able to lean on those records.”