

BLOC PARTY BIOGRAPHY.

It was, thought Kele Okereke, good to be home.

Bloc Party had been away on tour for almost two years. It had been a long time and a long way, but it was all great stuff. One million people had bought the band's debut album *Silent Alarm*. British music weekly NME made it their Album Of The Year in 2005. It was in the UK album charts for a thumping 69 weeks. It wasn't just the London-based four-piece's home country that fell hard for their agit-jitter guitar pop. Bloc Party – Okereke, Russell Lissack, Gordon Moakes, Matt Tong – had received similar plaudits across Europe, and in Japan. They raced up the charts in 17 countries. In America, they were the only Nu Skool Brit guitar band that could sell out 8000-capacity venues.

With success like that, who wouldn't be happy?

Nonetheless, Okereke was tired. Bloc Party's frenetic pace on stage and within songs had propelled them fast round the world but it also meant their frontman felt "too many songs were at the same emotional pitch." He was creatively frustrated. Why couldn't this mad music fan make beats and sounds like Timbaland could make beats and sounds?

And Okereke was hungover. He came back to East London and partied hard. How else to cope with all the changes in his life and the changes the 25-year-old witnessed going on around him on the streets that he hadn't walked in so many months?

Yet, in early 2006 when it came time to call a halt to the touring and begin work on their second album, Bloc Party's frontman and lyricist was inspired rather than suffocated by what he felt inside, and what he saw going on around him. Kele Okereke took all the joy, pain, freedom, chaos, success, tension, cocaine, nutjobs, racism and headless hedonism that swirled around him and the clubs, pubs, and pavements of his Bethnal Green home. He took all that positivity, that negativity, that energy, and trammelled it, forced it into a batch of new songs.

The result: an album that is an electrifying and staggeringly direct chronicle of post-millennial Britain. Okereke's bold, honest lyrics are set to ear-meltingly invigorating music. It's guitar rock, but not as we know it. It's Bloc Party, but not as we know them. In collaboration with producer Jacknife Lee (U2, Snow Patrol), they've created an album that bristles with slashed-up riffology, chop-changing rhythms, disco-techno and vocal confidence that can only be described as on-mic operatics. You've never heard Okereke sing and sound like this. Don't worry. Neither has he.

This is *A Weekend in the City*, Bloc Party's all-guns-blazing war on street-level terror. "East London is a vampire that sucks the joy right out of me."

"Is it a concept album?" Kele Okereke squirms. "I baulk a little at the word 'concept.' It's such a loaded term these days. But I guess there were themes running throughout the songs. I really wanted to make sure this album had a real centre. Whereas the last one didn't have a clear focus – I knew what I was aiming for a lot more with this record."

Take "SRXT." It's a hymnal, glorious song and nowhere near as maudlin as a song named after an anti-depressant and discussing suicide might be. But a blunt title begs a blunt question: is it autobiographical?

"When you write any song, you're expressing something from inside you."

Thoughtful Okereke worked hard over many months on these lyrics – no moon/June/heroin spoon platitudes here. His candor has even taken him by surprise. He's still, in a way, marshalling his thoughts on some of the words. But he's clear on the fact that he wanted to capture that weekend feeling in stark, honest detail. Between Saturday night and Sunday morning, thinks Okereke, all life – and all emotional points – are here. He addresses this directly on "Sunday."

The drums pound like a headache after “a heavy night, it was a heavy night,” before the hangover moves into a more blissful state. Over a euphoric, post-comedown melody, Okereke sings, “I love you in the morning, when you’re still strung out.” The night – or two nights – before the morning after are detailed in “On.” It begins as a minimal techno thrum with a bassline that throbs at the back of the head. Then it all kicks off. “Silver slugs lined up like bullets, rolled up twenties they disappear, you make my tongue loose.” Is this an unashamed celebration of the liberation of hedonism?

“Yes,” Okereke begins. “And no. After *Silent Alarm*, I realized I could have tried harder, so with this record I thought, ‘I’ll be honest about everything.’ All the ugly thoughts, all the things you wouldn’t tell your best friend. A warts-and-all account of where my mind is right now. It’s a song about getting fucked up on a Friday night. In east London you can’t go anywhere without someone having cocaine on them. Suddenly, when we came back from tour it was all around me. But it’s not a moralizing song about using cocaine – more an explanation of the appeal and the comedown.”

But *A Weekend in the City* is not just party music for party people. “Where Is Home?” concerns racism and death, that of Christopher Alaneme, the black teenager stabbed in smalltown Kent. “After the funeral breaking cola nuts/We sit and reminisce about the past,” begins one of Okereke’s most impassioned vocals.

“It’s to do with the idea of me, as a second-generation black person, living in the UK. I don’t really feel comfortable, I don’t really feel the door of opportunity in this country is open to me. All these articles in the mainstream press, all these images you see of young black kids terrorizing people, are reinforcing the idea of us as The Other.”

This polarizing of post-9/11 and post-7/7 society is also discussed in “Hunting For Witches,” a bold, anthemic song that opens with the line: “I’m sitting on the roof of the house with a shotgun...” There are enemies amongst us, we are told, and we must all be vigilant(ies).

In writing and recording the songs on *A Weekend in the City*, Bloc Party’s eyes and ears have roamed far and wide. “Waiting For The 7.18” is rebooted drum’n’bass with lovely chiming keyboards. “We were going for a real Richard D James [Aphex Twin] sound,” says Okereke. It sounds nothing like Bloc Party. “That was the idea.”

“On” is a giddy, blood-rushing celebration. “Uniform” is a slashing rock monster about homogenised global youth culture that will surely be a moshpit favourite. An unexpected influence was Kate Bush’s “Sat In Your Lap.” Okereke loved the “madness” evoked by the competing voices. “Kreuzberg” is the sound of a Hoxton U2, bigger, even, than the first album’s “Pioneers,” full of drama bigness even as the lovelorn lyrics offer up tender images aplenty. “Alluding to a stadium moment is not something to be ashamed of,” grins Okereke, “if it can be done well.”

And then there’s “The Prayer,” the album’s first UK single. You can hear Okereke’s voice multi-tracked to the high heavens. It was inspired by “St Luke’s Passion” by Penderecki, which the frontman listened to religiously for much of this year. “I was rethinking my voice as a separate instrument. I was stacking it and distorting it.”

Aiding this ambition was producer Jackknife Lee. He helped the band rethink what guitars – what rock – could do, and conjured up sonic wizardry at the flick of a Pro-Tools switch. Lee’s thoughts were particularly important in the creation of “The Prayer,” a staggering, motoring song destined to start warping radio airwaves any minute now. For all the serious themes and issues laid bare elsewhere on *A Weekend in the City*, do the lyrics to “The Prayer” prove that Kele Okereke has actually discovered that fame and success can be a good laugh?

“Yeeeeeaaah...” he says slowly, smiling bashfully. It was clear that, for all the dark material in the new songs, he was happier, more sure of himself, more up for it. “It’s weird,” he continues, “all these lyrics, save this one, I agonized over for months and months and months. Whereas this one

started off with a different feel, perspective. Garrett [Jackknife Lee] really encouraged me to try and do something that wasn't quite so meticulous. One of the best lyrics in pop history is 'Milkshake' by Kelis, 'my milk shake brings all the boys to the yard/I'd teach you but I'd have to charge.' It's such a sinister image. It doesn't mean anything, or it means the whole world. Is she a prostitute? Is she working in a milk bar? It has such a dark undercurrent. So with this song I was trying to cut my mind off from trying to rationalize everything. The first words just came to me. I wanted it to be something that would move people on to the dancefloor but in a real throwaway way. I think there's great validity in telling people that you don't have to try and over intellectualize everything. With 'The Prayer,' I was trying not to think."

"So," says Kele Okereke in conclusion. "That's what came through, this idea of success. There's something really bold there. Something really... not us! We're seen as a polite and serious band. But I wanted to do something that wasn't about that at all."

Join Bloc Party for *A Weekend in the City*. You won't think of the place, or the band, in the same way again.