

# ROCKPOOL

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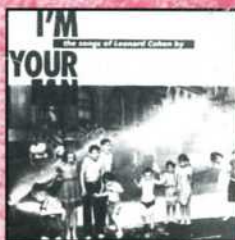
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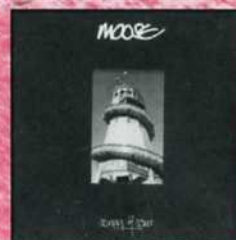
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# blur

I met Damon Albarn, the twenty-three year old singer of Blur, in the lobby of the Paramount Hotel, at 9:45am on the Saturday morning after their premier New York gig. I have listened to their new album, *Leisure*, and I have seen the show. I have lots of questions to ask, like where the hell the band gets off being so smooth on the recording and so, well, different on stage. But, I'm cordial and a little tired so I start at the beginning.

AT: *When did the band start?*

Damon: Two-and-a-half years ago, but I've known the guitarist (Graham Coxon) for years. We've got quite a strong musical relationship, so the nucleus of the band has been alive for quite awhile. Alex (the bass player) gives it a certain something. It's quite hard to define what it is...well, if it was off-balance already, he certainly topples the whole bit over. He's kind of passionately obtuse about everything. The drummer is very quiet, but he drums the shit out of his drums. We played six or seven gigs and someone came to see us from Food Records and that was it, really...*Leisure* was recorded in two-and-a-half months. It's very random...with three producers on it. It's a very random collection of things put together. The sounds of the band are more dictated by Graham. A lot of the guitar sounds are sort of *Abbey Road*, late '60s grungy sounds. But, the things I listen to most at the moment are bands like Television and Wire, just all those sort of interesting punk bands. I've never been interested in The Clash — it's too crude for me...too rock'n'roll. There's no need for rock'n'roll anymore. We're not into the rebellion.

Why the name "Blur"?

DA: No reason, really. Absolutely no reason. A lot of things that are given meaning have no meaning. Then, the meaning is to have no meaning?

DA: That's the hidden agenda.

Sort of like pop art?

DA: Yeah, actually it is. I never thought of it that way. But it sort of is like pop art. *Leisure* was meant to be sort of a mirror...for everyone. Shiny.

And the lyrics?

DA: The hidden agenda is sort of not to say anything. On *Leisure* the lyrics are sort of murmured feelings and that's all. They're not claiming anything.

Why?

DA: It was the only way I felt comfortable at actually saying something even remotely kind of new. I mean I could have said exactly the same thing in a more 'head'-oriented way, but I don't think it would be as effective.

Why?

DA: Well, people get an image of us, then they come to see us live. You know, people who hadn't seen the band were actually upset last night, really upset. We shocked them. The whole thing was too rough for them. I think the record company people had quite cold feet last night.

*You mean the stumbling around drunk, angry, pogo-dancing up-and-down, climbing the rafters, screaming, roughed-up sound that one couldn't expect from what they hear on Leisure?*

by Amy Talkington

DA: You can't package that, and we certainly aren't going to tone ourselves down.

*What are you going to do?*

DA: I think there's a limit to how much you can tour. Touring after awhile becomes dinosaur-like. The trick is to come up with something new and then you can do it again.

*What's your scene in London?*

DA: We're in a whole collection of people. It ranges from Teenage Fanclub to Lush. Teenage Fanclub's album is very similar to ours. The actual idea behind it...of the shiny package. *I'm actually embarrassed to ask...but, what about the inevitable comparisons to Jesus Jones? (fellow popstar Brits on SBK)*

DA: It's quite laughable, really. But, I want them (SBK) to do the same thing. I want them to push us because what we're doing could be quite shocking, and getting into a bigger arena will evoke something from people. We are strong enough as a unit to deal with massive corporations because we are articulate and on the ball. But, we're much more interested in humans than corporations. In England it's brilliant how successful we are. It's been proven to work, what we do. The way we are, the way we deal with everything, the way we talk to the press. It's been proven to work in England.



*What do you mean "proven to work"...the fact that you deal with the press at all?*

DA: Well, that too. But...we're in the *New York Times*. That's important. We get that sort of thing in England. It makes us different. People who make a living out of being articulate care to talk to us and see that it has a point. The thing that really sets us apart is that we really seem to attract people like that all over the place, little pockets of people who wouldn't normally get into pop music, for some reason, are interested in us. Of course, pop's the backbone of it because it's what gets us all over the place. But, we are more than a pop band...What it is, is that we're a kind of duality, and people don't quite know how to deal with it. Once you're pigeonholed, you only have a certain amount of life because you can only expand in your own little area, but if you manage to stay away from it and create your own rules...the whole idea of the duality is to create your own rules. You know, it's the whole American dream. It's just slowly getting through to people, the point of what the band is about. The idea is very 'head,' but live it isn't...it's very physical. The significance is in the whole, the whole of what

we are doing. You can't take one little bit and ignore the rest of it really.

*So, in order for anyone to understand the band fully, they must understand this duality. They must first experience the shiny package of the album and then see you play live. Otherwise, there is no duality.*

DA: Exactly. It's quite a lot to ask of people. That means you have to buy the album and come see us...and that's why it's called *Leisure*, because it's completely not that.

(Damon chuckles a characteristically airy giggle and seems content with himself for having come to that spry little conclusion...But, enough esoterics.)

*So what do you think of America?*

DA: I love America, really. You definitely go places in your life which change you.

*What have you seen?*

DA: I haven't seen much. I've been to a photo shoot all day in Greenwich Village and they let me walk up three blocks. I want to go to a flea market today, but I've only got an hour, so...

(So, we get in a cab and head down to 6th Avenue and 8th Street in search of a flea market.)

*So what else do you do with your life?*

DA: I live. I just live. I've only had three days off in the last three months, but I love it. It's necessary. It's like living with somebody's nauseating habits...you can't do it unless you love them. In a way, it's very hard, but it's great.

(When the cab stops, Damon says he'll take care of it. How suave, I think, and then watch him fumble around with his cash. He's got about 60 bucks American money. He counts out three ones and a 20

and hands it to the cab driver. I say, 'No, no wait. You gave him a 20.')

DA: I always do that. I've lost so much money in this fuckin' town.

*(Walking down 6th Avenue south of 8th Street, we start talking about class difference and money.)*

DA: I'm just not in it to make money. I mean, that's a very privileged position to be in where you're not motivated by money. People who are not motivated by money are only not motivated because they've had very, very fortunate upbringings. So, I know I'm very lucky. I'll never starve...In England we're

almost to the point where we're making money. But it's quite a thing these days to make money here. We're miles away from it.

*(Damon agrees that the extremes are greater in the United States and comments that it's no wonder the people are walking around with blank expressions on their faces when you look at this [the people on the street]. He has to call Mike Thorne of Soft Cell; producer of their next album. We find three payphones and he loses three quarters. Finally, I have a calling card and he only gets a machine and leaves a message. He has a piece of paper on which someone has scrawled places to buy retro clothes. The flea market doesn't exist, so we head down 4th Street for the next stop on the list, Screaming Mimi's.)*

DA: '70s, '70s clothes. That's the big thing. Yeah glam.

(We are walking by Washington Square Park and I'm starting to get into the tour-guideness of it all.) *This is where you can buy pot 24 hours a day. You know every drug has its neighborhood in New York.*

DA: Well, this is my neighborhood then. It's the only civilized thing really. Everything else has got problems attached.

Yeah?

DA: Well, I prefer it to coke and XTC and acid. But I don't really need drugs.

Do you drink?

DA: I drink on tour, but not at home. I drink a lot before I go on stage. It kind of counters itself out because I sweat so much though. I don't actually drink on stage. So I'm no drunk at all really.

*(Damon stops to buy a \$5 pack of incense in front of Tower Records and we continue on. Tin Machine's album cover is in the window of Tower and I ask him what he thinks about the obliterated penises for censorship's sake.)*

DA: Censorship? They're not so worked up about it in England. I mean, you've got a lot of very mad people here. But our first single, "She's So High", wasn't played on the radio because the lyrics were deemed too drug oriented. That's why we did that as an album, in a way. You know, I wanted to get a foothold, to give us a bit of acceleration. It was just a really good thing to do. It was a big hit in England.

*(So now I can understand what he meant when he so elusively said that what they were doing has been "proven to work." We're just passed the Bowery, when a man walking down the street says "Hello girls" as we walk by.)*

DA: Girls?...GIRLS?

*(And he looks back at the old man and giggles in disbelief.) What do you think about sexual harassment. I mean, not like that was sexual harassment...but it is, after all, the buzzword.*

DA: Well, I don't sexually harass girls...but I don't need to.

*(We talk about lecherous old men and rap music and Jane's Addiction. He likes Jane's "Been Caught Stealing" video. Videos...)*

DA: We had to change our video for the United States. It was too strange, not marketable in the slightest. When you're placed in that sort of situation and you don't know the country or any sort of reference points or any arguments against it, it's better to do something else really. In the end, it ended up being quite funny. We wanted to do just a basic straightforward performance, but the idea was that we'd do it on water. We did it, but it wasn't very well constructed, so in the end it nearly collapsed. So, we couldn't have a performance, all we could do was just stand there. That's the thing that's being put on MTV. It's not bad.

*Likening yourselves to Jesus much?*

DA: Yeah.

*(On 8th Street between 1st and 2nd Avenues he stops me.)*

DA: This is my kind of store.

*(It's the basement of a tenement, piled high with junk. Piles of old magazines and little boxes with odd buttons and earrings. He points to a Saturday Night Fever promo poster of John Travolta doing the hustle)*

DA: This is great.

He rummages through the old magazines with an articulate care that's equal to his carefully spoken word, saying that he likes old magazines from the late '60s and '70s because that's where "the shiny thing" came from. But, he doesn't want to buy anything, which is a good thing, because there's no one there to buy anything from. We keep walking. Near Avenue A, the word "borscht" in the window

of a new Polish diner catches his eye. "White Borscht with kielbasa." He wants some. We go inside and order from the Polish woman.

He finishes the soup and we are heading back across 3rd Street, when Damon spots Little Rickie's, the famous East Village kitsch shop. We go in and Damon drifts into heaven. He can't decide what to buy. He has \$51, but he wants to go to a bank to exchange more money so he can buy more things. When I remind him that he's an hour late to get back to the hotel and that no banks in the neighborhood are open, he decides to work within the budget. He buys some Mexican hand-painted sort of talisman. He thinks it's the most beautiful thing. He admires the hand-painted words which we can't understand. He buys all sorts of other little trinkets and I buy him a set of Sea Monkeys. He is amazed by the idea.

DA: They're alive though, but are they really alive? Yes. *(I send him off in a cab with no money. I mean not a dime. He said he'd exchange at the hotel when he got there.)*

DA: Off to do more interviews. Hurray!! You know, I hate saying the same thing over and over again, so I end up saying totally different things to every single interviewer actually.

Oh well.

## BLUR DISCOGRAPHY

"She's So High" (Food UK)

"Bang" (Food UK)

"There's No Other Way" (Food UK)

Leisure (Food UK)

Leisure (SBK)

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