

BLOC PARTY.

HYMNS is a rebirth for Bloc Party. After 16 years as a band, countless world tours and awards and four studio albums, Kele Okereke and Russell Lissack are taking it back to where it all began.

As the title suggests, the fifth Bloc Party record is about faith and devotion, but it is not, Kele insists, a religious epiphany. “I grew up in a religious house so I’m fully aware of the imagery, but I’m not Christian. It’s not something I subscribe to.” Instead, the concept came to him after seeing the author Hanif Kureishi, whom Kele has admired since he was at school, talk at the Southbank Centre in London. The author of *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Intimacy* was discussing evangelical art and how unfashionable it has become. “And that point stuck with me because for me, it seemed like for me music had originated in a religious place. The first music I ever heard was hymns at school. I started to think, if I was going to make music that had a spiritual dimension, that was sacred to me and to the things that I held important, how would I do it?” says Kele.

The result is a record that sounds like a band growing and changing, pushing new sounds via new approaches, and resulting in more free, less constricted Bloc Party. “When we started this band, we were all about being loud and spiky, and all the sounds had to confront,” Kele explains. “With the way I sang, the way the drums had to fill every moment, was very confrontational. After making *Four*, which was very abrasive, I wanted to make something more sensual, that took you in and hugged you, rather than hit you around the face. It was nice to let the atmospheres take over, to pull everything back, as opposed to it being a fight, or a dueling match.”

To get to the point of being able to make another album, however, the band had to navigate a tumultuous few years. They took a hiatus after their third album *Intimacy*, in 2009, during which time Kele focused on his solo career and DJ-ing, and Russell formed his band *Pin Me Down*, and joined *Ash*. They returned in 2012 with *Four*, and a subsequent world tour, during which original drummer Matt Tong stepped away. He was followed a year later by bassist Gordon Moakes.

“We’ve had break of two years now,” explains Russell. “We got to a point where the lineup had to change to allow us to go forward.” Kele adds, “It was clear at the end of 2013 that it just wasn’t working. If Matt and Gordon hadn’t left, we wouldn’t have carried on as Bloc Party. It’s the most awesome job in the world, being in a band, being able to create music and art and it affect people. It makes me feel sad that I felt back then that it was something I was going to walk away from. I never want to feel like that again.”

Kele and Russell soon realised that a new album was inevitable. “Bloc Party started with just Kele and I, and we used to write the songs together, and we found other people and grew from that. It feels like that’s happened again,” says Russell. They started writing together, just the two of them, in 2014, and were joined at various stages by the two new members who have made Bloc Party a four-piece again: bassist Justin Harris, whom the band met in his previous guise as part of the Portland indie rock band *Menomena*, and drummer Louise Bartle, a 21-year-old that the pair discovered on YouTube, and who “blew us away. It’s good to have someone bringing that energy of doing it for the first time. It’s made us all excited about going forward.”

Their enthusiasm for this new period in the band’s life is palpable. “Now we’ve written this record and met two brilliant people, it’s flowering again,” says Russell. “We’re really excited about the songs and we’re desperate for people to hear them and to start performing them.”

HYMNS marks a departure for the band sonically, too, with Kele and Russell trying sounds and approaches that they have never previously explored. “You can hear the space in the record, and it’s space that wouldn’t have been there if we’d tried to write it with four of us in the room,” says Kele.

“It’s still a very live record,” adds Russell. “Everything has been played, though it doesn’t necessarily sound like that. We both take a lot of influence from electronic music, for example, and then try to bring that into

a completely different environment.” Kele is astounded at the results. “What Russell is doing now is completely blowing my mind. He’s using the guitar as an instrument of white noise, as well as a melodic tool. I’m super-excited about getting this music in front of people.”

Kele says that in order to get himself into the headspace to write again, he cut himself off from the modern world. He had already left his east London home and moved to Brixton - another transformative experience, and one that allowed him the time and space for a domestic life - but in order to work on HYMNS properly, “I put myself in a bubble.” It there where he found the hymns of his childhood, the Florida Gospel duo The Consolers, Talk Talk’s ‘Spirit of Eden’ and Stevie Wonder’s Songs in the Key of Life. The track The Good News came from that exploration. “Ultimately, it’s about heartbreak and looking for the strength to carry on, which is a very powerful motivation for people,” he says. “It’s about the idea that you need to keep going.”

The Love Within starts with a line fans may recognise from The Prayer, the first single from second album A Weekend in the City: “Lord give me grace and dancing feet.” It was at that point that Kele first realised the influence of religion on his work, so it made sense to revisit it. “As much as I try to deny or hide it, it plays a big part in me as a songwriter.” He says the song came to him when he watched Stevie Wonder perform at a festival in Alabama. “He said the nature of religion wasn’t about god, or allah, it’s about handing yourself over and making space for the divine.”

Only He Can Heal Me is the first song that came from Russell and Kele’s writing sessions for this album. Russell drew on a stuttering, 2-step-inspired sound, while Kele saw it as a choral work. “I always knew that there would be a gospel choir on the track but I wanted to use the voices in a different way, giving the track a more baroque feel. It’s about the idea of salvation, whether that’s found in a temple, or in your lover’s arms.” It was the first song that gave them an indication of what HYMNS as a whole would sound like, says Russell. He felt more like a DJ than a guitarist, and it showed both of them that their maximalist inclinations could be reined in to beautiful effect.

Into the Earth came later in the process. “Russell describes it as easy-going, which is funny because that song is me thinking about my death,” says Kele. “I’ve never really contemplated that in the music I’ve made, but maybe it’s where I am in my life, where I live. It’s about growing old with someone and hoping this is the path you’re on for the rest of your life.” There’s a line in the song, “Rock n’ Roll has got so old,” which sums up that sense of moving on and changing. “That’s a reference to the person I was when we started, and I don’t really want to be any more,” he explains.

Exes is the most minimal track on HYMNS. It is simply, says Kele, an apology, “to the people I’ve hurt along the way. It’s for all the people I’ve not been so good to as a friend or as lover. As a musician I know I can be quite selfish - I can put my way above everything else. And sometimes that can make you lose sight of what is important around you.”

And despite some turmoil, both Kele and Russell are happy Bloc Party has kept going. “I realised that I want to do this,” says Kele. “I want to travel the world and I want to enjoy it all. In my mind, I wanted to prove something.” In HYMNS, they have done just that.

Bloc Party are Kele Okereke (vocals, guitar), Russell Lissack (guitar), Justin Harris (bass) and Louise Bartle (drums).

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