

A photograph of Damon Albarn performing on stage. He is wearing a dark leather jacket over a dark t-shirt and light blue jeans. He has short brown hair and is wearing sunglasses. He is holding a microphone in his left hand and gesturing with his right hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus purple and blue light.

By David Fricke

Catching Up With Damon Albarn

Damon Albarn can easily fill an hour with stories of how he seeks, wrangles and records the motley armies of guest vocalists, players and contributing producers that pack the Blur singer's periodic albums of apocalyptically charged hip-hop, credited to the cartoon-avatar quartet Gorillaz. On a recent afternoon in his New York hotel, a few weeks before the release of Gorillaz' fifth album, *Humanz*, Albarn – who launched the animated band in 1998 with fellow Englishman, illustrator Jamie Hewlett – rhapsodized about an encounter in Chicago with the American gospel-soul queen Mavis Staples, who delivers the emergency wail in *Humanz*' "Let Me Out," and revealed that rappers De La Soul hijacked the track "Momentz" from Albarn's original choice, comedian Dave Chappelle. Albarn also confessed that he produced Carly Simon's surprise appearance on the deluxe-edition track "Ticker

Tape" – with the Latin hip-hop singer Kali Uchis – by phone and Internet. He and Simon have never met.

Then there are ones that get away – twice, in the case of Dionne Warwick, whose intended vocal cameo for Gorillaz' 2005 album, *Demon Days*, was left on the cutting room floor. "She nearly did something on this record again," Albarn explains. "I've just been with Mavis Staples, and now I'm at the piano in Brooklyn with Dionne Warwick. But I think my lyrics are just one step too far for her to assimilate. We got to the point of singing but not recording however.

"It never got to posterity," Albarn says with what sounds like resignation, delivered with a mischievous smile. "But I have sat and played the piano while Dionne Warwick sort of sang a bit of one of my

songs. I have got that far.”

“There’s really nobody like him,” Hewlett, the creator of the graphic-novel heroine Tank Girl, says of Albarn. “Everybody of his generation, bands like Oasis and Suede – he’s gone beyond that. If Blur experimented the way he does with Gorillaz, Blur fans would say, ‘Why are they doing hip-hop? Why are they electronic?’ That was a frustration for Damon. It isn’t for me. I can draw whatever I fucking want. But for a songwriter, it’s great – to suddenly realize you can do what you want.”

situation you’re in. I do a lot on the Tube, on planes. Sometimes I get the sound of the compression in the cabin. I sample it. Everybody says, “That can’t just be iPad.” Well, a lot of this record is just iPad. It makes me wonder why you ever bother with bands.

Thankfully, I’m very lucky. I’m doing another record with the Good the Bad and the Queen. We’re doing that in May. That’s not GarageBand at all. That’s just the four of us [Albarn, ex-Clash bassist Paul Simonon, former Verve keyboard player Simon Tong and Afrobeat drumming legend Tony Allen] playing live, straight on the floor.

“for a songwriter, it’s great – to suddenly realize you can do what you want.”



Albarn is taking Gorillaz on the road in America this summer, with as many Humanz guests as he can muster at stops along the way. In this conversation, he also unveils other concurrent projects: a new album with his band the Good the Bad and the Queen and a theatrical adaption of the Sundiata Keita, an epic poem of the ancient Mali Empire in West Africa. For authenticity’s sake, Albarn – who has worked with Malian musicians is studying that country’s principal language, Bambara.

Albarn didn’t know any Mandarin when he and Hewlett created their pop-opera variation on the Chinese folktale Monkey Goes to the West. “We got away with it,” Albarn says, grinning. Learning Bambara “is quite time consuming. But I want to do it. And I find I’m really good at learning stuff when I want to – and being creative with it.” When I saw Blur at Madison Square Garden in October 2015, had you started writing – or even thinking of – a new Gorillaz album yet? I was starting to think. I was accumulating iPad information, which is how I make records these days. I usually write in an eight-bar loop with GarageBand. You can get a chord sequence that works every eight bars, something with a nice buoyance. Sometimes I put vocals on there. Sometimes I can’t get the vocals that good ever again. “She’s My Collar” [on Humanz, also featuring Kali Uchis] was literally written under my duvet one night in bed. It’s a song about the loneliness of the nocturnal journey, into the digital ether. Sometimes a tune is a very nice mirror of the

It’s not like I’m stuck in that [digital] world. I enjoy both worlds. I enjoy many worlds. And I’m equally comfortable in any of them.

When does Jamie enter the process in a Gorillaz record? Does he need music first to get visual? He’s there from day one. Originally, his studio was next to my studio. [The two worked one floor apart in a London building.] I’d go, “Look what I did today!” and lay it out to him. He’d spend the next day listening to it and drawing. Now it’s more of a correspondence thing, because he lives in Paris. But it’s really important what he does. Sometimes, if I’m honest, I think, “Why am I putting my music to these cartoons still?” But it really is important. It is a wonderful frame for this music.

You open the record with a spoken line – “I switched off my robot” – and then the parade of singers starts: De La Soul, Mavis Staples, Grace Jones. And you close with a bracing dance-rock track, “We Got the Power,” with that triumphant vocal hook by Jehnny Beth of Savages. It’s a record of loops, topped with messages of personal empowerment you know?

Absolutely. That’s why it’s called Humanz. Every conversation with every artist went like this: “I want this record to embody pain, joy and urgency. We are using our dark fantasies to imagine something happening in this town [gestures out the window at the New York skyline] in the near future, that is



“Does that make *Humanz* a political record?”

turning the world on its head.” No one was allowed to say “Trump” or “Obama.” Those who tried, you can hear the bleeps on the record where their names were. I didn’t want names, because this is not about that moment. That was the fuel for it. “Imagine how the world will be if that happens.”

Does that make *Humanz* a political record? I cast a vote too and it didn’t mean shit [Brexit]. Join the club [laughs]. This is an emotional response. I really try to keep it there. The topics come and go. But if you’re not emotionally engaged with what you’re doing, you couldn’t perform it. I try to work concurrently. It’s topical and something that comes from within me, which may be completely different. Does using different vocalists with Gorillaz enable you to write more freely, more effectively, than if you had to sing everything as in the *Good the Bad and the Queen* or on a solo record?

I see the *Good, the Bad and the Queen* record as being a soul version of [Blur’s 1994 album] *Parklife*. It’s stories about Britain – as it is now. We’ve been up in [the English seaside resort] Blackpool. That’s where I’ve been getting my energy for that. I decide on places, and I like sticking to it. Everything has to happen in my head in that place. It’s cinematic in

my head when I picture it you see.

Did you conceive of specific voices for each song on *Humanz*? For example, did you offer “*Momentz*” to De La Soul?

I didn’t hear De La Soul for that. [Rapper] Posdnous shows up. He said, “I want to do something.” [De La Soul previously appeared on *Demon Days* and 2010’s *Plastic Beach*.] We were trying to get Dave Chappelle to do that. But he knows Pos, and somehow, that’s how that happened. I don’t tell people what to do. I let people listen to loads of different tunes, then they choose the one they’re into. You’re never going to get the best out of people if you tell them, “No, you have to do this.” Do you get artists doubling up – different singers trying to grab the same tune?

I’ve had some terrible doubling-ups on this record – people I had to let down gently. [Pauses] This is such a good story. I just don’t want to hurt the person. [Pauses again] This person was on [*Humanz*] “*Charger*.” Then I was in Jamaica, and finally Grace Jones showed up. I played the tune to her. She was like, “Hmm, there’s something not right about this.” I said, “What is it? Do you want me

to take out the keyboards?" "No, it's this noise on here." "What noise? That guitar?" [Makes pinging sound] "No, I love that."

She wouldn't say it was this other person's voice. Clearly, once the voice had been taken off, the track was ready to work on. [Shakes his head] Some people don't necessarily want to be on the same tune with somebody else. How do you explain to older artists like Mavis Staples and Carly Simon that cartoon figures are involved? Probably the same way I explained it to [Cuban singer] Ibrahim Ferrer [on 2001's *Gorillaz*], Ike Turner [on *Demon Days*] and Bobby Womack [on *Plastic Beaches*]. They kind of like it. They're not necessarily super-engaged with

the advantage. He was from the working-class band. He was playing up to that and using it very successfully. I found it difficult to counter. What do you say? It's like when you get called "liberal elite" by right-wingers. The best I can say is "Call me liberal, but don't call me elite." How easy is it to work with him now? You were both alpha males in your respective bands.

He's really musical. He's got a great tone to his voice. I love his guitar playing. And he's funny as shit. He's fucking brilliant company. You do manage to get the best out of some hard-boiled characters. Having interviewed Lou Reed so often, I always wondered how you got him to appear on

"I don't get intimidated by famous people."



that aspect. I don't know. Sometimes I don't even tell them. "In a way, Blur always felt that we terribly underachieved in America."

But we're all really good friends. And I feel like I've given many of my best years to Blur, so I don't feel guilty in that sense. I've never said I'd never make another record. It's all the same thing at the end of the day. It's the nuances that make it different. It's just more music, to add to the mountain of music there already is. So how did you get guitarist Noel Gallagher, your Britpop archnemesis in Oasis, to play on "We Got the Power"? At one point, that track was Noel, me and [Blur's] Graham Coxon. It was the ultimate self-congratulatory Britpop moment. It was the victory lap, these geezers singing about all the power they had [laughs]. I went back and opted to doing it like you play something at the end of a film, as the credits roll. Jehnny Beth was necessary. The testosterone levels were off the fucking scale.

How is it that you and Noel can get along so well now, after Oasis' vicious sniping at Bluvv Nineties? Noel is not stupid. I love him for that. There was a point when they were set against us. And he had

"Plastic Beach." I have my ways [laughs maniacally]. I sent him quite a few tunes, and he just said they were all shit. Finally, I did this tune, and he liked it. I'm the perpetual suitor – but also not taking it too personally when someone turns you down. "I can do this without you. I'm only asking you because I think it would be cool." That's my attitude.

I don't get intimidated by famous people. I just look them in the eye and hope they look back. With Lou, we were in the studio. He'd written these lyrics. But he said, "Don't expect me to follow your verse-chorus thing. I'm just going to sing. And the way it drops is how it is."

It helps to be very flexible when you're working with people like Lou Reed. But you want that approach. You don't want someone just doing exactly what you want. You want that sense of opposition and independence. That's what it's all about.