

FRANCE

## A British musician in Paris

by JEREMY BLACKMORE

Les Jardins d'Éole is a green oasis on the Rue d'Aubervilliers, a Parisian park surrounded by low-cost housing and hugging the railway lines ferrying people eastwards from the Gare de l'Est. A rare place with big skies.

It's also the favourite park of British singer-songwriter Kate Stables, who migrated to Paris from Bristol 18 years ago in search of adventure with her partner and frequent musical collaborator Jesse D Vernon. On *Careful of Your Keepers*, the critically acclaimed new album by Stables's band – she goes by the alias This Is The Kit – that has just been released by Rough Trade, she paints a vivid painting of life in the park – humanity at its most beautiful and heartbreaking.

The meditative track in question, *This Is When The Sky Gets Big*, reflects one of the many things she loves about Paris – being able to travel anywhere in Europe by train. No need to bother with airports or leaving the ground. People constantly coming and going. “And the lines will take you somewhere else,” she sings.

Stables's lyrics recognise the hardships for those who live in the park because they have nowhere else to go. A place where people get on with their lives together and apart.

Her overriding memory is François Hollande's 2012 election victory. She recalls people flinging windows wide and cheering. High-fiving each other in the street. She says it was an amazing moment of hope and optimism.

Admitting she took time to settle in, it's clear how at ease she feels in Paris, where she and Vernon have raised their daughter. In one makeshift pandemic-era video, she strolled through the backstreets singing and strumming her guitar, exchanging smiles with passers-by. Chatting to me from her home in the 10th arrondissement, she says: “I love the sense of solidarity. I've been really blown away by the collective strength of Paris.”

Stables is a warm and engaging interviewee. She laughs often, but is also deeply thoughtful. At one point she breaks off from the new material to discuss the Gestalt paradoxical theory of change. Indeed, change is a constant theme throughout *Careful Of Your Keepers*. The writing started by exploring the nature of change through a global lens, before shrinking in to

investigate personal politics and internal climate change. Emotional change. “Turns out Gestalt had it down years ago!” she laughs.

While her music carries overtones of the quintessentially British folk records that first shaped her musical ear and voice, she has embraced Parisian culture. When I ask about favourite French musicians, she emails detailed notes, enthusing over a range of artists, using adjectives like “brilliant”, “genius”, “insanely groovy” and “ninjas”.

This Is The Kit found an early champion in Guy Garvey of Elbow before acclaim from the cream of American indie artists, leading to support slots on big US tours and collaborations with the likes of The National and Sharon Van Etten. This time out, behind the mixing desk it's Welsh magician Gruff Rhys, who draws out new textures in the band's music. A long-time fan, Stables remarks on how tuned in the Super Furry Animal is to the sound of the drums.

It's a perfect fit. Rhythm is the place where she has the most fun. She reveals a love of African Tuareg music and Bristolian trip-hop giants Massive Attack, as well as classic folk artists. Indeed, several of the French acts she recommends play with rhythmic drones, something that features often in her music.

After festival dates this summer, This Is The Kit embark on their biggest-ever headline tour of the UK and Europe (details at [titk.cargo.site/#live](http://titk.cargo.site/#live)). As most of the band are based in Britain, Brexit has made European travel with equipment and merchandise far more complicated and expensive.

Stables counts herself lucky to have the management structure to deal with this added bureaucracy, but says it will inhibit small bands who don't have the structure or the funds to do all that paperwork. “It's going to stop this exchange of new music internationally. Before Brexit I felt there were more European, foreign-language bands getting listened to and appreciated in the UK. I thought, finally! Now Brexit's happened, it's almost impossible for them to come and play [in the UK]. It's a horrible mess.”

Kate Stables, aka This Is The Kit, in her favourite park, the Jardins d'Éole  
Photo: Cedric Oberlin



## TANIT KOCH Germansplaining Quedlinburg



Abraham Lincoln coined the phrase, “If you look for the bad in people expecting to find it, you surely will.” In my experience, if you look for bad people you will surely find those, too.

So when my train last week from Berlin stopped in Magdeburg, the capital of Saxony-Anhalt, I didn't get off to witness the AfD's party conference ahead of the 2024 European election (“For the true Europe to live, this EU has to die”).

Instead, I stayed on for another 50 minutes to look for beauty. I wanted to check out a Unesco world heritage site at the edge of the Harz mountains: Quedlinburg.

This place is from another world. You basically walk through a Disney fairytale; I expected a pumpkin carriage to come around every corner. It is a jewel, rightfully mentioned in the travel guide *1000 Places to See Before You Die*.

Revelling in half-timbered houses – *Fachwerk* – quickly turns boring, I realise, but just bear with me, I'll get to the Nazi-cult-meets-Indiana-Jones part in a bit.

What's so special about *Fachwerk*?, you may ask, because you can indeed find it pretty much anywhere in Germany. But not in the same entirety. Quedlinburg has more than 2,000 half-timbered buildings in total, spanning eight centuries. The oldest dates back to 1347, the youngest are examples of Jugendstil buildings (our art nouveau). Wherever you look in the historic centre, you see small blue-white plaques identifying houses as listed monuments.

Towering over them is the castle mount, a *Game of Thrones*-style location. Heinrich I (Henry the Fowler), who established the Ottonian dynasty, was buried here in 936. The Saxon is often labelled the first German king although his time, source-wise, is one of the most sparse in the entire European Middle Ages. Still, historians agree he did play a decisive part in unifying what was to become a German empire eventually. Quedlinburg served as its first capital, hosting *Reichsversammlungen*, imperial assemblies, in the 10th and 11th centuries.

Enter from the extreme right Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer SS – who was said to have thought himself a reincarnation of the other Heinrich. He used the millennial anniversary of Henry's death in 1936 to create a mythical cult around the

Germanic “Führer from a thousand years ago”. The trouble was, in those 1,000 years, Henry's mortal remains had somehow gone missing from his hilltop chapel grave. Construction works, expansions, well, things get lost. No matter, thought Himmler, because an SS underling dug up bones near what was by now the impressive hilltop church St Servatius. Himmler declared them to be Henry's and ritually buried them in the crypt next to his wife, Queen Mathilde. In 1938 the Nazis had seized and desecrated the whole church and turned it into a weird SS votive site.

Today, Mathilde rests alone again. The bones Himmler placed next to her are certified non-royal; Heinrich's remains are still missing. But his widow is surrounded by her treasures again. During the second world war, Lutheran authorities had hidden them in a mineshaft on the outskirts of town. They were later found and guarded by the US army, but objects went missing: among them the *Samuhel Gospel*, a ninth-century Latin manuscript with a jewel-encrusted cover; the 1513 *Evangelistar* with a couple of jewels on the cover, too, precious reliquary flasks and boxes and a carved ivory comb (allegedly from Henry's powder room).

For more than four decades the whereabouts were unknown until, finally, an investigator traced the lost treasure to Texas, home to a former army lieutenant who had sent the items to the US through the military mail in 1945 and whose heirs were trying to sell them. Most were returned in the 1990s and are on display. As are, by the way, paintings by Bauhaus artist Lyonel Feininger saved from Nazi destruction by a Quedlinburg collector.

Next year, Quedlinburg will celebrate 30 years of world heritage status, as one of the best-preserved mediaeval and renaissance towns in Europe. By German standards, this is very rare. Quedlinburg escaped major damage during the war, and after.

The GDR, because the ancient houses weren't in great shape, had specific plans to tear down most of the old town and build socialist *Plattenbauten* (large panel-system buildings). Luckily, authorities didn't have the funds (which, sadly, was often the case in west Germany). And the end of the GDR came just in time for capitalism to save the half-timbered houses from falling apart. Come and see for yourself.