



# SUPER

## ALBUM INSIGHT

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## PET SHOP BOYS

THE DUO EMBRACED HOUSE MUSIC FOR THEIR SECOND ALBUM WITH PRODUCER STUART PRICE, DESCRIBED BY NEIL TENNANT AS "THE MOST 'UP' RECORD PET SHOP BOYS HAVE EVER RELEASED"

STEVE O'BRIEN

**B**y the 2010s, most bands that had been together for more than 30 years were used to being out of the commercial spotlight. It's only a select few that, so long into their career, were still hitting the same chart highs as with their very first albums. So it was with the Pet Shop Boys in 2016, a full three decades since the release of debut offering *Please*. That album had peaked at No.3 in the UK in 1986, the same position that *Super*, their 13th long-player, would enter the

charts at. If it had gone awry, it's likely the critics would have pounced on that album title ("*Super?* If only!" our imagined music critic sighs), but in the end it seemed an entirely fitting name: "*Super?* It certainly is."

The first taster of album number 13 came in February 2016 with the release of *The Pop Kids*. It may have underperformed commercially (UK No.128 – what's wrong with people?), but this slice of semi-autobiographical dance-pop remains one of the band's most effervescent 45s.

As well as being the first song to be released from *Super*, *The Pop Kids* was also the first track to be written for the album, having been composed by the pair in Munich in early 2014. To some, the lyrics looked as if they were at least partially based on the experiences of Neil and Chris themselves ("Remember those days, the early 90s?/ We both applied for places at the same university/ Ended up in London, where we needed to be/ To follow our obsession with the music scene") and even PSB designer



## THE SONGS ▶▶

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### 1 HAPPINESS

*Happiness'* techno-like opening suggests we're not in warm pop waters for the Pet Shop Boys' 13th long-player. Though as soon as the melody kicks in, it's clear that Neil and Chris have a canny knack of marrying the energy of techno with the elegance of pure pop.

### 2 THE POP KIDS

The first single off the *Super* album, this tells the story of two friends who met at university in London in the early 90s, went clubbing together and who "loved the pop hits and quoted the best bits".

### 3 TWENTY-SOMETHING

Track three is a dark, reggaeton-influenced study of jittery millennials "in a decadent city at a time of greed". "We were on tour all around Latin America, and we were hearing reggaeton everywhere," Chris recalled. "And on the way to our gig we were listening to a reggaeton radio channel and we were a bit obsessed with it really."

### 4 GROOVY

One of the more retro-sounding tracks off the album, *Groovy* feels like it could have been some off-cut from *Please* or *Actually*. As ever, the lyrics show off Tennant's keen wit, with the famously inexpressive vocalist singing, "Look at me, I'm so groovy."

### 5 THE DICTATOR DECIDES

Though Tennant had taken aim at politicians before, *The Dictator Decides* approaches politics from a different angle, telling the story of a tired, self-loathing, hereditary tyrant who's privately hoping for a revolution: "If you get rid of me we can all be free."

### 6 PAZZO!

This Italo house number is largely lyric-free, but sounds disconcertingly like *We No Speak Americano* by Yolanda Be Cool (that's the song – released in 2010 – that Will, Simon and Neil dance to in *The Inbetweeners Movie*, if that helps).

### 7 INNER SANCTUM

Another largely instrumental track, *Inner Sanctum* was written, Chris revealed to *Fused*, with a specific German nightclub in mind: "We definitely kept thinking this should work well in Berghain, in that big cavernous power station. I mean you can imagine that even though you're not in Berlin – even though you're in Beverly Hills at the time!"

### 8 UNDERTOW

Another technopop wonder, *Undertow* is a slice of classic Pet Shop Boys that could fit just as easily on *Behaviour* or *Very*. Tennant's lyrics, equating falling in love with drowning, are, once more, brilliantly subversive.

### 9 SAD ROBOT WORLD

A change of tempo with this one, a melancholic, Kraftwerkian ballad that paints a *Blade Runner*-like picture of the future: "Sad robot world/ Where you ponder leisure/ Created for your pleasure/ Sad robot world/ Machinery is sighing/ I thought I heard one crying".

### 10 SAY IT TO ME

The fourth single released, *Say It To Me* was put out without a video, which no doubt contributed to it not charting at all in the UK (it did make No.40 on the Indie Chart). It deserved better.

### 11 BURN

With its Giorgio Moroder-evoking opening, *Burn* keeps the energy up, with Tennant's lyrics more sparse than usual. Basically, the song is just "We're gonna burn this disco down before the morning comes" endlessly repeated. Try dancing to it without chanting along with Neil before the song's end.

### 12 INTO THIN AIR

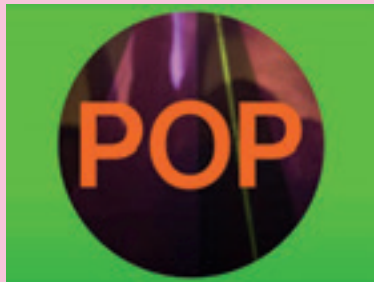
The album's closer wades once more into political waters, but remains typically vague as to its targets – "Too much ugly talking/ Too many bad politicians/ We need some practical dreamers", urging an escape from the hell and disappointment of the modern world: "Shall we get away from here/ Where no one can find us?"

## THE VIDEOS ▶▶



### TWENTY-SOMETHING

Unusually for the Pet Shop Boys, who previous to this had always embraced the pop video as an important part of their brand, *Super* only produced one promo, in the form of Gavin Filipiak's clip for second single *Twenty-Something*. Lasting five minutes, it tells the story of a heavily tattooed San Diego gang member after he is released from prison, arriving home to his wife and children and a mountain of unpaid bills. The video's gritty imagery contrasts nicely with the song's varnished sound, and is a powerful critique of the American prison system.



### THE POP KIDS

As for the other singles, fans had to put up with simple lyric videos. There is a clip online for fifth and final release *Undertow* that calls itself an official video, but it's not (official videos are presented through the duo's YouTube account). But those looking for some visual accompaniment to *Super*'s various numbers, there are some standout TV and gig performances. Check out the pair's playing of *The Pop Kids* on *The Graham Norton Show*, or their Daft Punk-inspired – the hats! The hats! – performance from their 2018 Inner Sanctum Residency.

Mark Farrow reacted to the line about the early 90s to Lowe: "You knocked a few years off there!" Instead, the words were based on a friend of Chris' who moved from Birmingham to King's College in London to study History where he made friends with a girl. "They both loved pop music and they used to go clubbing all the time and because of that they were known as the pop kids," Neil said in *Superlaunchbook*.

The writing of the album proper kicked off in Berlin in November 2014, with Neil and Chris travelling over to their studio there "for two or three weeks at a time" over a nine-month period. By the following July they'd completed 25 songs, of which 12 ended up on *Super*.

*Electric* had proved such a positive experience for the pair that they were keen to work with Stuart Price again on *Super*. Before going into the studio to record its follow-up, Neil told their producer, "We want to make it *Electric* but more so".

Price headed to Neil and Chris' London studio in July to listen through everything the duo had written, making a decision to go with, in Tennant's words, "the more electronic/dancey ones". Any songs that were deemed too "conventionally pop" were put aside. Tennant felt that *Electric* had re-energised the pair, taking them back to their electronic roots. *Super*, then, would be a solidifying of that new/old sound. "Until this album and the previous album we've never been electronic purists," the singer told *Fused*. "There have always been other instruments and orchestras and things like that. Whereas this album and *Electric* are purely electronic albums."

Recording took place in Los Angeles, but Lowe would insist that the City of Angels had little influence on its sound. Instead,

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**NEIL TENNANT**

it's Berlin that really informed *Super*'s sonic identity. While the album has little in common with other famous records written in the Grey City, such as Iggy Pop's *Lust For Life* and David Bowie's "Heroes" (both recorded prior to the Berlin Wall falling), *Super* does reflect the city's then-vibrant club culture, with one track – the pumping *Inner Sanctum* – sounding as if it was made for Berlin's iconic Berghain club.

The second track to be released off *Super* would be *Twenty-Something*. "[That song] is in the Pet Shop Boys tradition of observing," Neil reflected in *Superlaunchbook*. "It's just looking around in Shoreditch or Soho and seeing what everyone's like, and also it's about people you might meet. There's this anthropologist side of me, looking at people and just seeing how we behave, and how interesting it is and how different people are from the way they were 20 or 30 years ago."

One track on the album, *The Dictator Decides*, is another Pet Shop Boys track that directly reflects modern politics. While Neil and Chris are hardly shy in confronting contemporary issues in their songs, rarely do they stray into overt political territory (though

*I Get Along*, off 2002's *Release*, retold Tony Blair's sacking of Peter Mandelson as a breakup song). Yet *The Dictator Decides*, while still never referencing any then-current tyrants in person, is a harder-hitting lyric than we're used to from the duo ("The joke is I'm not even a demagogue/ Have you heard me giving a speech?/ My facts are invented/ I sound quite demented"). What makes this song so unique is that it paints a nuanced picture of its titular dictator, in that he wants to be free as well. "He's sick of oppressing people and really he wants to give up and flee and live on the beach in the Med," Tennant said at the time. "I don't even know why I thought of this, but it came to my head – the idea of a dictator wanting to give up, the dictator feeling trapped."

Also unusually for a PSB album, there are two instrumental – or largely instrumental – tracks in *Inner Sanctum* and *Pazzo!*. Clearly influenced by the voiceless numbers on Bowie's 'Berlin trilogy' records, Tennant would claim "they make the album breathe a bit", and certainly they give the LP a refreshing structure. When asked to describe the album at the time of its release, Neil simply said, "I think it's old Pet Shop Boys mixed with new Pet Shop Boys."

Released on 1 April 2016, coinciding with the opening of a pop-up shop in BOXPARK in Shoreditch between the 1st and 3rd, *Super* won the Pet Shop Boys luminous reviews. *The Guardian* awarded it four stars, saying, "From smart studies of anxious millennials to compassionate portraits of unlikable politicians, the songs on the duo's second album with producer Stuart Price are a celebration of camaraderie through music." Similarly, the *NME* beamed at an album made by a duo who, at the time, were 61 and 56, comparing it to the similarly love-bombed *Electric*: "This new offering continues down that path," they wrote, "refining the sound of its predecessor rather than reinventing it. It's an expansive 12 tracks of pummelling beats and arpeggiated synths, laced with roaring crowds."

Even the less enthusiastic reviews were still broadly positive, with *XS Noise* opining: "*Super* is not going to be regarded as a Pet Shop Boys classic by any stretch and will divide the fan base with its retro house styling and minimal vocal output. If this were juxtaposed with say *Electric* for instance then no one would bat an eyelid but, comparing to much of their back catalogue, classics like *Actually*, *Introspective* and *Behaviour* this would come across like a remix album and not something that Tennant and Lowe have meticulously articulated for months on end fine tuning every detail."

The record would debut at No.3 on the UK Albums Chart, shifting 16,953 copies in its first week, and becoming their 13th consecutive Top 10 studio album. In the States, *Super* debuted at No.58 on the Billboard (22 chart places below *Electric*) with first-week sales of 10,000 copies.

Thirty years on from their debut album, the Pet Shop Boys proved with *Super* that they were still not only relevant, but burningly vital. Thirteen is so often thought of as an unlucky number. For Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe, however, it would prove anything but. ■