



## ALBUM INSIGHT

# FUNDAMENTAL

## PET SHOP BOYS

TWENTY YEARS ON FROM *PLEASE*, THE PET SHOP BOYS WENT BACK TO THEIR ROOTS BY TEAMING UP WITH THE MOST IN-DEMAND PRODUCER OF THE 1980S – TREVOR HORN...

STEVE O'BRIEN

**T**he Pet Shop Boys and Trevor Horn? As soon as the producer was announced for Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe's ninth studio album, the general reaction was, "Of course!" followed quickly by, "Sorry, why has it taken this long?"

Of course, the three had worked together before, on the *Introspective* tracks *Left To My Own Devices* and *It's Alright* way back in 1988, but *Fundamental* would be the first full-scale collab between these titans of synth-

driven pop. Of course, when the news first broke, it seemed like a *Classic Pop* reader's wet dream – the writers of *West End Girls* and *It's A Sin* teaming up with the production mastermind behind *Relax* and *Poison Arrow*. How could it fail?

Of course, not many of Horn's clients are as artistically independent as the Pet Shop Boys. So how would this collaboration work? Whose signature sound would win out? Would this be a Neil and Chris album with a smattering of Horn magic, or an orchestrally-

drenched Trevor Horn record with added Tennant and Lowe? In the end, it would be both, and one of the most satisfying records in both artists' vast catalogue.

The writing for what would become *Fundamental* began shortly after Christmas 2004, and by April '05 Neil and Chris had amassed 16 songs, of which 12 would find their way onto the album. Their initial plan, however, was that their ninth long-player would be, in Tennant's words, "a very minimal electro dance kind of album", but then



## THE SONGS ▶▶

### 1 PSYCHOLOGICAL

An unusually subdued opening for a Pet Shop Boys (and indeed a Trevor Horn) album, *Psychological's* punchy synths recall early Kraftwerk. The track epitomises a strand of Neil and Chris' writing, however, in being both eerie and danceable at the same time.

### 2 THE SODOM AND GOMORRAH SHOW

Horn's circus-like production on *Fundamental's* second track is the first proof of quite how fertile this creative marriage would prove. Giddily infectious, it's astounding that this wasn't chosen as a single, though it's difficult to imagine lyrics like "Sun, sex, sin, divine intervention/ Death and destruction/ The Sodom and Gomorrah show/ Is a once-in-a-lifetime production" sitting comfortably on *This Morning*.

### 3 I MADE MY EXCUSES AND LEFT

This simmering ballad's aching melancholia recalls the mournful *It Couldn't Happen Here*, one of the great never-singles in Neil and Chris' catalogue. A welcome change of pace after the exuberant *The Sodom And Gomorrah Show*, this is one of the stand-out tracks on the album.

### 4 MINIMAL

There are shades of New Order in this one, despite the of-its-time use of the Vocoder. Trevor Horn, in an interview from 2016, told how he let Peter Hook know his trademark sound had informed a Pet Shop Boys number. "I've just

ripped you off on a Pet Shop Boys track," he told the bassist. "I've kind of copied you, because that thing that you do is really good."

### 5 NUMB

This Diane Warren-penned number had originally been procured by the Pet Shop Boys to be one of the new songs on their 2003 compilation *PopArt: The Hits*. In the end, *Numb* was tracklisted on *Fundamental* and would be one of its three singles. It really shouldn't work, but bizarrely does.

### 6 GOD WILLING

Lasting just one minute 17 seconds, this can barely be called a song. Sounding as if it was a portion of a number that was started and never finished, it's a mystery as to why this was ever included in the LP.

### 7 LUNA PARK

A favourite of Trevor Horn's ("I always like the doomy ones," he said), this gorgeous ballad appears to take aim at America, a land of cheap thrills and rampant commercialism: "On the shooting range/ The plastic prizes never change/ So make your mark on Luna Park."

### 8 I'M WITH STUPID

It may have been inspired by the relationship between Tony Blair and George W Bush, but the lack of specificity allows *Fundamental's* debut 45 to have a broader meaning, that is when someone you know starts to date, or hang out,

with someone of staggering stupidity. Hey, we've all been there.

### 9 CASANOVA IN HELL

Tennant revealed that this one is about loss of sexual potency. "It's about growing old," he said on the *Fundamental* interview CD promo. With lyrics such as "Her sharp suggestion/ He couldn't get an erection/ Came as a shock/ He finds himself a laughing stock", it's a blackly comic look at ageing lotharios.

### 10 TWENTIETH CENTURY

How very Pet Shop Boys to write a song titled *Twentieth Century* once we were actually out of it. A pulsating dancefloor filler, it's a number that Madonna would give her teeth for. Crazy this wasn't a single.

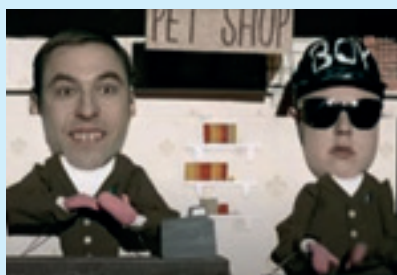
### 11 INDEFINITE LEAVE TO REMAIN

No, this isn't a very prescient song about Brexit, but is instead about UK immigration reform, with Tennant singing, "Seeing you here/ You're my nation/ This is my application/ Give me hope/ Keep me sane/ Give me indefinite leave to remain."

### 12 INTEGRAL

*Fundamental's* closer, which was inspired by the Identity Cards Act of 2006, wasn't actually released as a single until 2007 when a remixed version of the song was put out to promote the duo's fourth remix album, *Disco 4*. The single peaked at No.197 in the UK.

## THE VIDEOS ▶▶



### I'M WITH STUPID

Few comedians were bigger in 2006 than Matt Lucas and David Walliams. *Little Britain* was still in its pomp and Walliams had yet to blot his copybook by insulting *Britain's Got Talent* contestants. So the fact that the Pet Shop Boys managed to nab them for the video for *Fundamental's* first single was a big deal. In it, the comedy duo stage a performance in which they play the roles of Neil and Chris, miming *I'm with Stupid* while dressed in outfits from the *Very* era. The promo ends with Walliams and Lucas asking for the approval of the audience, which is revealed to be Tennant and Lowe, fastened to their seats.



### MINIMAL

A complete contrast to their *I'm With Stupid* video (no cross-dressing British comedians in this one), this Dan Cameron-directed promo is sleek and stylish and once more puts the actual duo front and centre. Filmed in Paris, it features a pair of dancers (Keir Knight and Thailai Knight specifically) moving to form the letters of the chorus, while Neil and Chris perform in front of a light display. The Australian-born, Central St Martins College Of Art-educated Cameron has also helmed videos for Blur (*Music Is My Radar*), Garbage (*Androgyny*) and David Guetta (*People Come People Go*).



### NUMB

Another dramatic about-turn, this is more of a story video, albeit one of an avant-garde variety. Described on the Pet Shop Boys website as "an icy emotional landscape of borrowed dreams, sewn together with the power and style of Russian constructivist cinema", it was directed by Julian Gibbs, Julian House, and Chris Sayer. Gibbs and House had previously directed music videos for Primal Scream, Luke Slater, and Doves, while Gibbs had come straight from a BBC adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, bringing some of that film's fairy tale-like magic to this promo.

"out of nowhere came all these epic songs." Clearly, if you're wanting something spare and minimal you don't ask the man behind Frankie Goes To Hollywood and Propaganda to produce it, but if your songs need the kind of grandiose orchestration that Neil and Chris were hearing in their heads, then there was only one man to approach.

"[Neil and Chris] generally have a clear idea of the kind of record they want to make," the veteran producer explained to interviewer Chris Payne in 2016. "Pet Shop Boys are really good with record producers – they understand record producers, they understand their function and that does help, when people understand what it is that you do."

The duo had already recorded much of the album as what Neil described as "quite sophisticated demos" before Horn came on board. The one-time Buggie would end up working on the album between May and November 2005.

The first taste the public had of the Boys' ninth offering was just a few weeks before the LP dropped on 22 May 2006. *I'm With Stupid* was released on 8 May and, no doubt helped by a video featuring the then-massive stars of *Little Britain*, Matt Lucas and David Walliams, it secured the boys their highest chart hit (UK No.8) since 2000's *You Only Tell Me You Love Me When You're Drunk*.

"*I'm With Stupid* comes from that slogan from the 70s, that you'd get on one of

those T-shirts with an arrow pointing at presumably your best friend or your partner or your wife or your husband or something," Neil said on the *Fundamental* interview CD promo. "I always found that funny to be honest, because it's a very simple, insulting idea, and I'd always had this for many years down as a song. I just thought I'd base the story on Blair and Bush [the Iraq War had begun in March 2003]. It's about someone having a relationship with someone and all their friends think how ghastly he or she is for going out with this frightful person because he or she is so stupid."

*I'm With Stupid* would be typical for the album in reflecting real-world events, but like 2002's *I Get Along* (which was inspired by the personal and political fall-out between Tony Blair and his spin-doctor-in-chief Peter Mandelson), it's all in the ear of the beholder. *I'm With Stupid* may have been inspired by then-Prime Minister Blair being apparently in thrall to the neo-hawk US President George W Bush, but it doesn't hammer the point home. Blair is never referenced, nor Dubya. So unlike many more songs from the time that were motivated by the War on Terror, *I'm With Stupid* hasn't dated and is able to remain open to interpretation.

There are, of course, many classic Pet Shop Boys compositions on *Fundamental*, but there's also a rare example of a song by another songwriter, in this case Diane Warren. *Numb* isn't a cover, as its first ever airing was on *Fundamental*, but this high-flying ballad had at one point been offered to Aerosmith, who turned it down (and this is probably the first time the Pet Shop Boys and Aerosmith have been referenced in the same paragraph). Warren was of course known for her showstopping production numbers, and her songs – which include Cher's *If I Could*



Neil and Chris perform at L.A.'s Wiltern Theatre in November 2006

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Earning two Grammy nominations in 2007, *Fundamental* entered the UK Albums Chart at No.5

"IT'S ALSO THE ONLY TIME I'VE HEARD NEIL SING IN AMERICAN. HE NORMALLY SINGS IN ENGLISH. I POINTED THIS OUT TO HIM BUT HE DIDN'T SEEM CONCERNED."

TREVOR HORN

at No.5. In the US, despite the LP peaking at a lowly No.150, it earned two Grammy nominations for Best Dance/Electronic Album and Best Dance Recording for *I'm With Stupid*.

"The album's title seems appropriate," commented *The Guardian's* Alexis Petridis, "focusing on New Labour's trials has reconnected the Pet Shop Boys with something of their essence. Their image as pop's arch-ironists has obscured their abilities as incisive social commentators."

Other reviews were similarly warm, with *Pitchfork* opining: "*Fundamental*, as cleverly titled as any of the eight albums that preceded it, should be a prime moment for this duo, and it is without question a grand improvement from their most recent work. Their electro-disco is back in fashion, which lets them return to, umm, fundamentals. Working again with 1980s star producer Trevor Horn, they make tracks like *Integral* pop with a grandiose synth drama half-worthy of Frankie Goes to Hollywood."

Awarding the record four out of five stars, meanwhile, *Slant* wrote: "*Fundamental* is an album that begs us to look beyond the surface of things, to the impulses that inspired them, to the results they've wrought, to the elements that make them up, and finally, to what they mean. Fittingly, its own surface is rather deceptive, an alternately orgasmic and slow-burning chameleon that threatens to charm and/or horrify at the start of each new verse. Truly, this is born out of the fractious times we live in."

*Fundamental* is an album that remains close to most Pet Shop Boys fans' hearts. Of their 21st century albums, it's the one that most resembles their Imperial Phase output, and, artistically speaking, proves a seamless marriage between Neil Tennant, Chris Lowe and Trevor Horn. From the splendour of *The Sodom And Gomorrah Show* to the throb of *Integral* to the warm balm of *Luna Park*, it's a masterful record that recalls the Boys' early days while also embracing the present.

At the time of *Fundamental's* release, the Pet Shop Boys were celebrating the 20th anniversary of their debut album, *Please*. By rights, they should have been obsolete by 2006, a middle-aged pop band with little relevance to the contemporary music scene. Yet at the same time as honouring their past, Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe also proved how absolutely contemporary and relevant they remained. ■

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*Turn Back Time*, Celine Dion's *Because You Loved Me* and DeBarge's *Rhythm Of The Night* – usually needed a stadium-filling diva voice, not Neil Tennant's droll delivery. Yet it's the tension between the song's intent and the singer's poker-faced interpretation that makes it so unique.

"I was really shocked when they said they wanted to do it," Horn revealed to Chris Payne in 2016. "I was just surprised, and it's also the only time I've heard Neil sing in American. He normally sings in English. I pointed this out to him but he didn't seem concerned. There's a moment in that song where it goes from being

totally electronic to being totally played. When he goes 'I wanna be numb'... On the word 'numb', it shifts from being machines, sequencers and programmed drums to being everything real."

*Fundamental* would be released on 22 May 2006, with the liner notes dedicating the album to two executed Iranian gay teenagers, Mahmoud Asgari and Ayaz Marhoni, who were hanged in the country's Khorasan province on 19 July 2005.

Following *I'm With Stupid*, two further singles were released from the record – *Minimal* (UK No.19) and *Numb* (UK No.23), with the LP itself entering the Albums Chart