



# STANDING TALL

*James guitarist Saul Davies reflects on the highs & lows of the band's history as they headline OnBlackheath this month*

Words MADELEINE HOWELL

**W**hen I catch up with James' long-standing guitarist Saul Davies to discuss the newfound revival of the Manchester indie rock band – best known for hits *Sit Down, She's a Star* and *Laid* – ahead of the grand finale of their UK tour at OnBlackheath Festival this month, he's in an optimistic mood. In fact, he seems almost taken aback at the impressive resurgence of the band of late, with lead singer Tim Booth firmly back on the scene sporting his trademark moustache.

Their comeback has gained pace since they released their album *La Petite Mort* and headlined the Castle Stage at Camp Bestival in 2014, but this year has turned

out to be even bigger and better after the release of their latest record, *Girl at the End of the World*, and a hotly anticipated appearance at Glastonbury that saw them play the opening slot at The Other Stage – a remarkable 26 years after their 'massive' set at the festival back in the early 90s.

'Glastonbury this year was amazing,' recalls Davies. 'It was an emotional day and there was a strange atmosphere because it was the morning of Brexit, but it was great to be there officially cutting the ribbon.' Despite pressure to play their old hits, James also played their new

material to an appreciative crowd. 'There's nothing worse than old bands playing new songs,' he laughs, 'but that's exactly what we did that day.'

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'We've had so much support from 6 Music,' he continues. 'Even though we've been around for a long time, we're a new band to some people, and our audience has grown.' James has certainly had its ups and downs over the years, but reforming and going on to sell '45,000 tickets in less than an hour – more tickets than any other UK tour of my whole career' was a defining moment that made for a happy



James are headlining along with Hot Chip and Primal Scream

Quiet now, but Blackheath will soon be hosting one of the top London festivals of 2016



contrast to a traumatic break-up and 'alcoholism and abuse' that has plagued them in years past. 'We went from being a group of nice, hummus munching boys to that,' he reflects candidly.

But on a lighter note, what's the new album like? 'It's a bit of a relief from *La Petite Mort*, which was very dark and interesting,' he reflects. 'There's more light in the new records and it feels more confident. It's happier, less about lyrical themes and more about the music. We've always had an element of electronics, but this has much more of that.' Straight after Glastonbury, the band were back to



## STAGE IS SET

OnBlackheath isn't all about the music...

### CHEFS' STAGE

Don't miss the big names cooking up a storm on the chefs' stage, headed up by celebrity chef and master of Italian cuisine Theo Randall. He will be joined by the likes of Hemsley & Hemsley, Jun Tanaka, Madeleine Shaw, Neil Rankin and Cupcake Jemma.

### STREET FOOD

Feeling peckish? Fear not – there's also a delicious range of London's finest street food vendors to sate your appetite, a chance to tuck into the movement right now.

Enjoy Anna Mae's Mac 'n' Cheese, Dough Bro, The Cheeky Indian, Higgidy Pie, Zoe's Ghana Kitchen and Burrito Boys.

### FOR THE KIDS

Little ones are in for a treat as the Puffin World of Stories heads to SE3 to create a unique, magical experience with the best loved characters in children's literature, as well as crafts, a Magical Storytelling Stage, a Talking Maze, and a Village Green Sports Day.

their roots up north in Sheffield to write their next record, having signed a three album deal with BNG. 'Hiding away is part of our process,' explains Davies. 'Once we're together we're very prolific and creative. We're very tight-knit.'

Davies admires other musicians that are 'bloody-minded', and isn't afraid to cite Abba as an inspiration. 'It's the one thing that unifies the bands we like.

They've all got a spike about them – The Stones, The Pixies, Velvet Underground, The Fall... Abba were spiky and they revolutionised music, albeit in a very different style to The Fall. We all like The Doors and Underworld, but what we really admire in other artists is wilfulness,' he states.

When I ask Davies how it felt to come close to knocking Adele off the top spot of the UK Album Chart this year, his own wilfulness shows. 'Well, it was disappointing that we didn't knock her off the top spot,' he retorts. 'But album charts don't mean as much as they used

to. In a world without *Top of the Pops* and *Smash Hits*, and all those outlets we had as kids, we're not left with many ways of judging how well we're doing. It did mean a lot though. It's a testament to the fact we're making good records.'

Next up, Davies and co. are raring to go for their top spot at OnBlackheath alongside Primal Scream, Hot Chip, Belle & Sebastian, Roisin Murphy and

Squeeze. 'It's going to be a great way to end the summer,' Davies reflects. 'The difficulty with festivals is that we run out of time. We've got 14 hours of material, so it's about deciding

how to present ourselves to a new audience. We don't just think "F\*\*\* it, let's play all the hits" – we do songs people love, but we also want to challenge ourselves. Blackheath will herald a natural pause. We'll write some more and then we're touring in Australia.' Catch them while you can...

OnBlackheath runs from 10-11 September.  
Find out more at [onblackheath.com](http://onblackheath.com)

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