

PRINT ISSUE #51: “Silence is deafening: Shame on finding strength in vulnerability”

Despite often being mistaken for a gospel record, Shame’s *Songs of Praise* was an acerbic, pummelling feat in a punk scene crying out for new ringleaders. Nearly 200 gigs, a minor breakdown, and a pandemic later, they’re back with a weirder, wiser second album. In the week preceding its release, Olivia Stock sat down with wiry frontman, Charlie Steen, and lead guitarist Eddie Green, to talk rejecting expectations, punk’s vulnerable new groove, and a vendetta with La Policia.

Riddled by incertitude and absence, the past year has been a quagmire for the music industry, and for London scamps Shame, who describe themselves as “primarily a live band”, it’s been one of substantial adjustment. This didn’t, however, stop them from releasing their long-sought second record, *Drunk Tank Pink*. Tossing any worries of a sophomore slump to the wind, it weaves together unflinching autobiography with assimilated experience and hard-won observations from the past few years, taking the band’s proclivity for storytelling to new heights. That feverishness extends to frontman Charlie Steen’s personality, who in conversation darts between ideas like a moth flitting from bulb to bulb.

Still at school when they wrote songs for their 2018 debut *Songs of Praise*, spending afternoons practicing above a Brixton pub when they should have been doing their homework, Shame crafted a jerky, engaged, post-punk style that captured the uncertain thrills of youth and the mood of the moment. “*Songs of Praise* sort of documented one period of our adolescence,” Sheen reflects, “from the ages of seventeen-ish to nineteen.” He talks openly about himself with a frank matter-of-factness; if what he’s saying starts to get a little too deep or serious, he’ll diffuse the pressure with a burst of schoolboy laughter. “It was a real whirlwind. Our feet barely touched the floor.” When the buzz around their breakthrough debut lulled, Shame were engulfed by a silence kept at bay by years of supersonic touring and each other’s inescapable company, and were forced to look inwards to work out their next steps.

Where rock’n’roll’s code of omertà once rendered struggling musicians voiceless, Shame are part of a new generation of bands who wear these emotions, like brazen tattoos, upon their sleeves. Driven to a point of self-confessed “complete exhaustion,” Steen describes a time following the first record where he “couldn’t sleep and was throwing up eighteen times a day.” A breakneck globetrotting tour that saw the band play over four-hundred gigs in the space of a year left the singer searching for himself in a bottle; for solitude in a world of excess. “When you’re on the road, unless you’re in the shower, you’re never really on your own,” the singer explains, “and even when you come back, it’s easy to just go down the pub every day and find your own distractions.” He pauses momentarily, picking at the hem of his jumper: “I think the new record is mainly about coming off the road, about that jumping off the cliff moment.” On 6/1, this sentiment is perhaps most palpable. In its jerking guitars and urgent, careening energy, the track perfectly represents the wild discord between the highs of being on stage conducting an undulating thousand-strong crowd, feeling like a modern God, and then the pondering of where you can possibly go to in your mind after that extreme high. This is an album about the quiet that must follow the noise.

Though it is clear that the band are lost without live shows, the pandemic has provided an unusual opportunity for its members to refresh and recollect. “In some ways, I was quite grateful to have all that happen,” Sheen admits. “Things like this might happen in your personal life, regardless of whether you’re in a band because, with anything you’re passionate about, you want to give your all.” The silence that followed *Songs of Praise* would go on to inform much of its predecessor, which was conceived in a rented room in a former nursing home. Painted a taffy pink to resemble a lurid “womb” that would go on to inform the record’s title, it became a space for the singer to make sense of this new reality. “One of the themes we touch upon a lot on the record is the idea of silence,” Sheen explains, reflecting on his period of self-imposed hermetism, “I think if I were to sum [the record] up in just a sentence, it would be ‘learning to enjoy one’s own company.’”

It was only later that the singer found out the pinkish hue has a history of calming troubled souls. In the late seventies, psychologists attempting to improve behaviour in Canadian schools noticed children behaved better in rooms painted that shade. They took it further and learned it had the same calming effect on aggressive prisoners when it was painted inside drunk tanks and jail cells. Despite its proximal sentiments, Shame's *Drunk Tank Pink* offers a new sense of space, of notes ricocheting off walls. Whilst *Nigel Hitter* and *Water in the Well* have craggy punk-funk edges that can be traced right back to early Elvis Costello and Zappa, *Snow Day*, *Great Dog* and *Station Wagon* are hard heavy beasts that you wouldn't want to meet down a dark back alley. This sense of palpable scope is a real triumph of the record; while *Songs of Praise* often felt like a collection of early singles, like many debut albums often do, *Drunk Tank Pink* never feels like anything less than a fully-realized vision. On it, the band, as both people and musicians, have grown in just about every conceivable way.

More collaborative and experimental than its predecessor, the record was pieced together from home demos, phone recordings, and fragments of melody that each member brought to the table. This lends the album a looser, more experimental feel. "There was definitely a desire on our end to push the boat out a little bit in terms of instrumentation and the way we were using our own instruments," Green grins. "Obviously there's a risk of releasing a carbon copy of your debut, which we absolutely didn't want to do, so I think we definitely tried to make things a little more avant-garde." Exploratory tendencies can certainly be heard on tracks like *Alphabet*, where Green and fellow string-picker Sean Coyle-Smith flick out angular, tendon-twanging grooves while Forbes teases listeners with choppy left-field beats. There's more room to breathe here, but the band never waste a second.

"We were actually making demo's as we went along," Green continues, "so rather than approaching the record from a purely instrumental standpoint, it gave us the ability to look at things with production in mind, which I think for us was quite a new tactic in helping us structure songs better. You can just be a bit more thoughtful when it's laid out open there for you." The latter sentiment is one echoed throughout the record, both in its thoughtful, brooding production, and Steen's lyrics which, delivered in a soul-baring snarl, tremble with millennial tension. "Coming back from tour and seeing my friends, it didn't matter whether they were working, not working, at uni, whatever, everyone just seemed to be struggling with personal aspirations or identity," Steen explains, when asked if the band feel like they speak for more than just themselves on this record. Green proceeds tentatively: "It would be great if what we do in any way echoes the frustration of a generation, but I'm cautious to declare my own part in that. I feel like there's a certain danger in having a big enough ego to genuinely think you're changing the world."

The recording process itself was far from an assumptive, punk affair. Tucked away in a chateau in the Parisian suburbs under the watchful eye of legendary producer James Ford, who Green describes as "a trusted grown-up," the band turned (Josh's) bedroom demo's into living, breathing articles. "There was a chef and every room had a giant Victorian bathtub. It was like a proper mansion," the guitarist gushes, "but we were only there for three weeks, which isn't a huge amount of time to complete a record, so it got a bit hectic towards the end." The result is an album that feels thoroughly lived-in, dense with the experiences of all the band's members for the first time.

Though well-intentioned, Shame's haste was short-lived as the pandemic saw the release date pushed back by a series of long months. At the time of interview, that adapted release date is just a little over a week away, and its mic-wielder reflects on the process gingerly: "I was nervous when we started writing it back in February [of 2019] and I'm nervous now, but in the time in between, I was absolutely fine. There was a moment, cheesy or whatever as it sounds, when we were recording in La Frette and you peer back and feel proud of these songs. Even playing through them in practice today, when you're proud of anything, any sort of external critique or worry of what people are gonna say, kind of floats away."

It's impossible to get through Shame's latest without noticing the bevy of homages to both their predecessors and contemporaries. With incessant thwacks of cowbell, rolling drums, and Steen's animated shrieks, *Water In The Well* is an unabashed throwback to Talking Heads – a sonic love affair the singer fondly attributes to his bandmate. “Sean [Coyle-Smith] was super into, and got me into, *Remain In Light*” Sheen grins, “and especially the production side and the stories behind it.” Stretched taut with striated strums and snare drums, cuts like *Alphabet* catapult the band straight back to punk modernity, crisply loaded with all the arrogance, alienation, and wild exaltation of their youth. Here, the band sheds its inner-Strangers spirit for a fleeting moment, eschewing slurry spoken rants for Idles-esque chants – in fact, one could easily imagine Joe Talbot popping a vein or two, singing “monkey see, and monkey do / just like me in front of you.”

In Steen's tormented tones and relatable Gen-Z musings, which largely forgo the former's political sloganeering, the record transpires with a healthy semblance of originality. The five-minute cut, *Snow Day* finds Shame forsaking cheap hooks and witty remarks for a magnificent slow burn where Steen conveys the simple but profound pains of being a young person in 2021: “And you wanna just dive in / It's the most beautiful thing you'll ever see / And yet you walk past it all the time...” “I think that was the main change lyrically,” Steen concurs, “it went from being very external on *Songs Of Praise* and talking about characters, to becoming quite internal and putting myself in front of the lens a bit more.”

When talking in-depth to the pair, an aura of thoughtful introspection is palpable, but “when we first meet people, they think we're off our tits all the time,” Green laughs, “which is firmly not the case.” Having spent their formative years in a bubble of hedonism and hours-long van drives, however, the Londoners have amassed a pretty healthy mantel of on-tour war stories. “A more recent but really unfortunate one was when we were in Spain, and we lost 1,200 euro to the police in less than twelve hours,” the guitarist groans. Following a gig in the country's cultural epicentre, Green explains that the group weren't ready to pull the plug on proceedings. “I don't know if you know in Barcelona, there's dudes walking around selling cans of lager, so we bought a few cans and were sat by this fountain having a really lovely evening, when all of a sudden, about twelve police on motorbikes parked up. All of the Spanish people were allowed to go but the rest of us all got an 80 euro fine for drinking in the street.”

He continues bemusedly. “The next day we were driving to Madrid and we got pulled over on the motorway. The police officer was like, ‘we need to weigh your vehicle...’ and got out these two plastic sheets on the floor connected to a machine that wasn't even plugged in. All the while, he was explaining to his junior officer how to get away with this scam, thinking that none of us could understand, but I actually speak Spanish.” Green bursts into irrepressible laughter at the band's misfortune. He managed to haggle the fine down from 1000 euros to 750, but the band's merch pot took yet another hefty blow. “When we eventually to Madrid, our tour manager missed the turning to get into where the venue was, so he had to reverse like a centimetre, but as soon as he did that, a police officer stopped him for driving the wrong way down a one-way street and that was another 200 euro.” Exasperated, the band offered La Policía a bulk-wad of Shame t-shirts. “It was a great deal,” Green shrugs, but the damage was done.

Whilst the media like to pen pictures of a crazy, drug-addled bunch who you'd cross the road to avoid making eye contact with – an image no doubt reinforced by their music: a snarling and seething blend of urgent post-punk, brooding atmospheres, and cauterized vocals that feel born of 1970s Manchester but funneled through a contemporary sheen. In reality, Shame are an affable (if *unlucky*) bunch, nothing more than a group of youngsters having a mountain of laughs in an industry they are already wise enough to know can be as fickle as it can treacherous. “I feel like music is the best way to navigate stereotypes like that,” Green muses sagely.

Perhaps Shame's reputation as an unapproachable band of snotty, outspoken kids stems from where the band was born and cultivated: The Queen's Head, Brixton. The pub-come-doss house that billeted Fat White Family's slow, grimy ascent to domestic recognition and made national news when the band in

question stood atop of its roof with a giant banner proclaiming 'The Bitch is Dead' in reference to the death of Margaret Thatcher. Now a gastropub, for a period the place had a reputation for its behind-the-scenes anything-goes ethos, solidifying it as some sort of sordid den of anarchy, a reputation that the Fat Whites themselves only strengthened.

A young Shame saw all of this up close as Forbes' dad, who was mates with the pub's landlord, Simon Tickner, had bagged them an upstairs rehearsal space. "They were fairly hectic days, I'm quite glad we went there when we were younger and a bit more naive," Green laughs. "Sometimes we'd go in there and all of our stuff would be missing, and then we'd get a message from the Fat Whites' tour manager saying 'we left it in a hotel in Vienna, sorry!'" Feigning anger, he continues, "that was a very common occurrence, I'm still keeping a tab on what they owe me!"

When the band's instruments were in the country, venues like The Queens Head afforded Shame an indispensable opportunity to iron out the kinks in their now-infallible live show. "There are so many little intricacies that are just necessary to learn," Steen urges, "you need to know how to handle it when a mic cable comes out, if an amp stops working, or if the crowd doesn't like you! Or what to do if a venue won't give you your money, all of those little details, bands need to learn somewhere." Musing on the young band's off-stage antics, Green adds with a grin, "we also learned what not to do!" "It was pretty weird because the bands that used to hang out at that pub beside us were Fat Whites and the Alabama Three, who are a lot older than us, and we'd invite our mates from school and they'd be like 'why do you hang out with like sixty-year-old dudes at the weekend, are you okay?'"

Reflecting on the bedlam of their tender years, Sheen admits: "When people ask, 'do you think you'd be where you are today without The Queen's Head or any sort of independent venue?' The answer is absolutely no. You need somewhere you can put in ten thousand hours and those are the kinds of places that offer that opportunity." With a furrowed brow and a manner of restorative maturity, he describes such establishments as "pillars of culture." "In my opinion, it's not worth coming out of all this if those venues aren't there."

Since cutting their teeth at the Windmill, many of the band's members became regular (pre-Covid) frequenters, keen to keep their finger on the industry pulse. "Josh [Finerty], Sean [Coyle-Smith], and [Charlie] Forbes are f**king amazing at listening to new bands," Sheen begins, "while I'm sort of stuck in the 1950s and slowly catching up!" More Billie Holiday than Eilish, he professes to struggling with staying up-to-date with new bands, as well as his undying love for American doo-woppers, The Ink Spots. "For me, that's what makes it so special when you hear an album that really blows you away. Most recently it was quite a controversial one – a lot of people who like him didn't like this record – but *Ghosteen* by Nick Cave." "Whether it's a vanity or insecurity thing, I think we all hope that people will listen to our albums in full, but for the most part, I'd be hypocritical if I said I did that," Sheen laughs.

As the singer disperses the contents of his kitchen table with the sleeve of his sweater and begins to roll a cigarette, we look instead to the future. "We've done one socially-distanced live-show, back at The Windmill in November, and it was different, but the gratitude we had in being able to do it at all sort of outweighed that." "You forget about the release, the high," he divulges, "and this form of yourself that through survival you've sort of had to neglect for a long period of time."

Taking the paper to his lips, he pauses wistfully. "You can't dwell on things, you know. I can't say we would've played Brixton Academy, we would've done this or that, there's no point. Hindsight's always 20/20 and I wear glasses." We both erupt into laughter, the solemnity dissipating as quickly as it arrived and my own specs sliding down my face in agreement. Collecting himself quickly and rolling the paper between his forefingers, Steen surmises pithily "it'll be an adaptation but you can never underestimate the perseverance of the creative industry."

“We were part of a huge auction for The Windmill which raised a really substantial amount of money, so I think one positive of the pandemic is that perhaps people are starting to realize the importance of grassroots music venues and the artists that play at them,” Green muses. The guitarist and culinary aficionado offered Zoom cook-alongs for the cause, while Steen bravely offered to paint ‘any image of your desire’. “Obviously socially-distanced, seated shows are a bit s**t, everyone knows that, but at the end of the day, if what’s coming off the stage is what people want to hear and there’s money in venues’ pockets then that’s a good show by anyone’s measure.”

With a June-shaped lifeline now on the horizon, the band, who have “mostly been rehearsing in a little studio in Camberwell,” are set to come flying out of the traps. The change in space and pace has far from dampened the band’s plucky spirit; Steen’s virtual face a picture of glee at the thought of finally getting to bring *Drunk Tank Pink* to life on stage. “*Station Wagon* might be my favourite on the record, but it’ll be a real challenge to do justice,” he gushes.

Having escaped the cultural hedonism of the early Queen’s Head (relatively) unscathed, re-discovered their tour-trodden identities, and navigated the release of a sophomore album amidst a global pandemic, it’s difficult to imagine anything stopping Shame at this point. In a time-worn punk zeitgeist, the young South Londoners have fashioned their own path, finding strength in vulnerability and meaning in silence. At its core are characters like Steen and Green, navigating a ruthless industry with talent by the gallon, infectious likability, and desert-like wit, and it’s impossible not to follow in gleeful tow.

Words by: Olivia Stock