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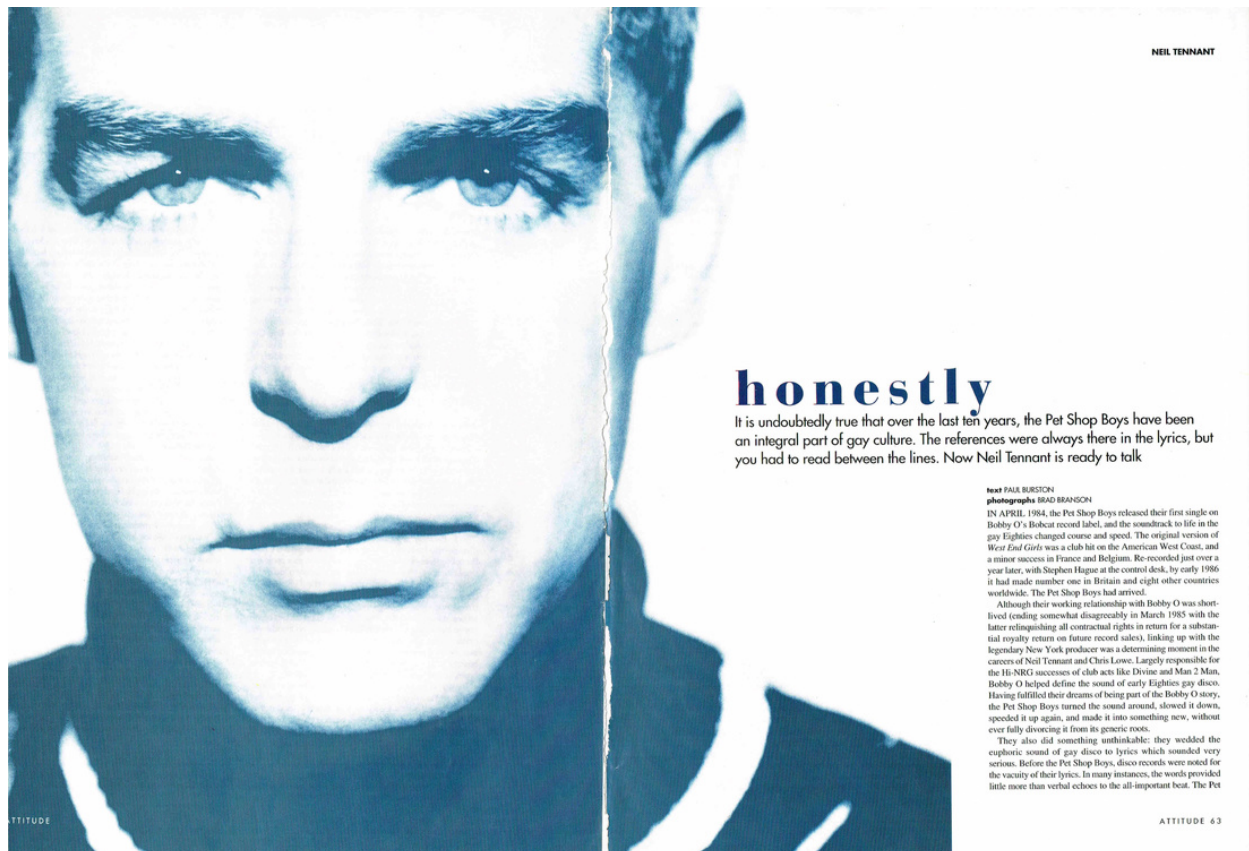
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Observaciones Recortes de diarios, folletería, fotografía original

Fuente



NEIL TENNANT

Shop Boys were keen on the beat too, but they weren't prepared to surrender everything to it. Even now, it is hard to imagine Neil Tennant ever completely surrendering himself to a typical disco lyric like, "Ooh, love to love you baby". For one thing, it's too passionate. The Pet Shop Boys may have made records that spoke about passion ("I don't like much really, do I?" Chris Lowe deadpanned on *Funkin' Up*). "But what I do like, I love passionately", but they have never been especially good at expressing it through song.

And of course the other point to make about a lyric like "Ooh, love to love you baby", the other thing that makes it not very Pet Shop Boys, is that frankly, it is just too obvious.

"We were stitched up by the NME. They did an interview with us, and they went on and on about hamsters. They never actually asked us, 'Are you gay?' And then Jimmy Somerville was quoted everywhere, slagging us off. I thought it was quite arrogant of him"

"Obviously" is not a word one would normally associate with Tennant and Lowe. In spite of Neil Tennant's famous assertion that their music was a marriage between Hi-NRG and "traditional songwriting, where the lyrics are interesting and make some kind of personal statement", the "statement" part has never been very explicit. The truly "ironic" thing about the Pet Shop Boys is that they have somehow managed to spin a career around the fears, the frustrations and (just occasionally) the fun of being young(ish), gifted and gay without being drawn into discussions about that all-important, always absent "G" word.

"Obviously, people are going to look at our songs and read things into them," Neil said once. Obviously, but he also maintained that he and Chris were "completely misunderstood anyway". Refusing to clarify the situation, he kept stressing that there was a difference between what he and his musical partner might do in private, and what they were prepared to say in public. "We've never said anything about our sex lives to the newspapers or to magazines," he told the NME in 1986. "And we don't intend to."

AND THEY HAVEN'T. Until today, that is. Today, Neil Tennant has Something To Tell Me. Or at least that's what I've been led to believe. The word on the gay grapevine is that the vocal half of the Pet Shop Boys has decided to speak out about his private affairs, so naturally I've been pushing for an opportunity to allow him to do just that. The only problem is, in all the discussions we've had setting up this interview, nobody has actually raised the subject. Not me. Not my editor. Not even the Pet Shop Boys' press officer, who suggested that he and I meet twenty minutes before Neil arrived. I was anticipating some kind of prep talk, something along the lines of: "Look, Neil has decided to do this interview after a lot of careful thought, so please respect his feelings and please, please be gentle with him." Instead, we had a friendly chat about life and the media in general and nothing very much in particular.

So here we are then, Neil Tennant and I, forty-five minutes into our agreed two-hour session, and still I haven't propped the question. Instead, we've discussed a lot of other, more public things, like why the Pet Shop Boys decided to do a charity record. "We didn't actually decide to do a charity record as such," Neil informed me, a little cryptic. "We just had the idea

of doing *Absolutely Fabulous* because both Chris and I love the programme, and we decided to do it for Comic Relief as a way of dealing with it, really. That way, we knew we wouldn't have any trouble getting the samples cleared by the BBC."

We've talked about the Pet Shop Boys' contribution to the forthcoming Kylie Minogue album. "Oh yes, the legendary Kylie album. Well, we always had to work with Kylie, of course, because she's such a trademark: Kylie! She's made it, really, she's just one name. We were asked if we'd like to work with her last year, but we'd just finished our last album and couldn't really be bothered to do any more. Then we wrote this song, and I said to Chris, "Oh, we should give this one to Kylie." I thought it sounded like Stock-Aitken-Waterman Kylie, which is exactly what she's trying not to do, unfortunately. But we sent it to the record company anyway, and they liked it, and she liked it. They've made it very different to the way we wrote it. It doesn't really have the same tune in it, for instance, and they haven't put the chorus in, but I suppose that's very modern."

Largely thanks to the fact that Kylie is such a modern girl, Neil and I have sailed close to the wind a few times. We've talked about Kylie's gay audience, for instance, and the difficulty of broadening one's appeal without alienating one's core audience. "I think it must be quite difficult being Kylie," Neil remarked at one point, to which my natural response was: and is it difficult being Neil Tennant?

"In what sense?" was his guarded reply.

In the sense of being misunderstood.

"Sometimes, though I'm learning not to care about it. It is obviously a failure of ours, that we have given people the impression that what we do is some kind of elaborate joke."

So having established that it is obviously a failure of mine not to have given Neil Tennant the opportunity to clear up any lingering doubts anyone might have about whether he is or is not gay, I go off into a very long, elaborate question about his impression of how the Pet Shop Boys are seen by the gay press, my impression of how their first album, *Please*, seemed to share a lot of common ground with Bronski Beat's *Smalltown Boy*, and how he felt about Jimmy Somerville's much-publicised accusation that he and Chris Lowe were exploiting gay culture for career purposes, and not putting anything back.

Neil Tennant draws a deep breath. "The thing is," he says, rearranging himself on the sofa, "we were kind of stitched up by the NME on that one. They did an interview with us, and then they went on and on about hamsters. They never actually asked us, 'are you gay?' And then Jimmy Somerville was quoted everywhere, slagging us off. I thought it was quite arrogant of him, actually. He obviously thought that he had a right to talk about us in that way, and that his views on the subject were more important than our own views. His view is that the entire point of being a pop star is to be a positive role model. I reject any notion of being a positive role model to anyone. I personally find that an arrogant way to think of oneself..."

He pauses for a moment, realising perhaps that this line of argument is only likely to open old wounds. "When Bronski Beat came along, I was still assistant editor at *Smash Hits*. I loved those first few records. I loved the fact that they were



intended it to be read that way, the Pet Shop Boys have effectively set the pace of gay urban life "to a disco beat", whilst staying in tune with the shifting moods of the times. If *Please* was about wanting a lover and going out late, *Actually* was about waking up and going out shopping, and *Introspective* was about wanting a dog and feeling, well, introspective. By the time the Eighties ended with *Behaviour*, Tennant and Lowe were writing songs about staying in, giving up smoking ("cos it's fatal"), and coping with the pressures of monogamy.

And the pressures of loss. The Pet Shop Boys arrived at precisely that moment when AIDS began making headlines in Britain. A year later, Neil Tennant's closest friend confided that he had recently been diagnosed as having AIDS. They'd known each other since they were fifteen. "It all came as rather a shock to me at the time," Neil recalls. "In 1986, it was still very shocking to know someone who had AIDS." He registered his feelings on a song from *Actually*, entitled *It Couldn't Happen Here*, and for the next three years made regular visits to St Mary's hospital. When his friend died in 1989, he wrote a song about going to the funeral. *Your Funny Uncle* describes the tensions that arise when a gay man's family and friends meet for the first time in order to pay their last respects. It was the flipside to *It's Alright*, a cover of a Sterling Void song, the lyric of which insists that everything is going to be alright, for the simple reason that "the music plays forever".

Actually, this isn't nearly as flip as it sounds. In 1987, on a track called *Hit Music*, Tennant had wondered aloud about the changing function of music in a world with AIDS. "It's a song about what happens when you take the sex out of dance music," he explains. "What does music become then? It becomes a sort of insulator, a form of protection, of comfort." Lest anyone conclude that he was being far too glib about all of this, the repressed anxieties surfaced a year later on *Domino Dancing*, where he sang about dancing with danger, adding another number to the score and watching "them all fall down".

"This year alone, three people I know have died of AIDS. It's a lot. It's why I get angry when people go on about how AIDS is some kind of 'fashionable disease'. I mean, I don't know three people who've died of cancer this year, or heart failure, or multiple sclerosis. It's at the back of your mind all the time. Actually, it's at the front of your mind all the time."

HAVING SURVIVED ALMOST a decade of minding their language and feeling gloomy, the Pet Shop Boys ended 1993 with what many people, me included, consider their most obviously gay musical statement yet. Neil Tennant refutes my suggestion that *Very* marks a departure from previous albums, that it is, in effect, the Pet Shop Boys' coming out album. "What you have to remember," he says patiently, "is that all of our albums contain songs written over a period of twelve years. *To Speak Is A Sin*, which is on this album, was actually written in 1983. If there is a difference between this album and the albums before, it's simply that *Very* was written from the point of view of me being in love. It's a diary of a relationship. But that is really the only difference to speak of. There's a song on the last album, called *Nervously*, which I wrote in 1981, before I'd even met Chris Lowe. It's about two people – sorry, two boys, or two men or whatever – meeting for the first time. And some of the songs on *Please* are as gay as anything we've done since. So I don't think it's entirely true to say there has been a

radical progression in those terms."

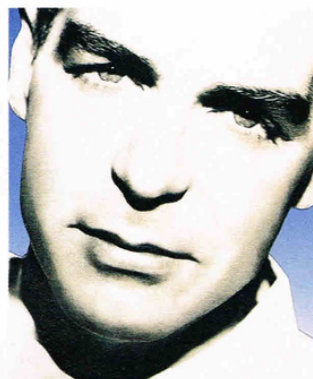
Perhaps not, but the decision to record a particular song at a particular time must count for something – it is at that moment, after all, that what was once a private thought becomes a public expression. And whereas the discreet coding of previous albums might have allowed straight listeners to avoid the point and accuse others of 'reading things in', only a complete and utter moron could fail to follow the plot of *Very*. Anybody who listens to Neil Tennant singing about dancing to disco, taking all of his clothes off, finding liberation in love, dreaming of the queen, waking from an AIDS-soaked nightmare and finally deciding to go west, and then arrives at the conclusion that this is *not* an album about what it means to be gay in the 1990s is quite clearly 'reading things out'.

"People will always have their own views about lyrics anyway," Neil says, sounding a little bored with the subject. "Obviously, we've taken a lot of ideas about being gay and presented them to a heterosexual audience. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing I couldn't really say."

I'VE HAD THIS great idea for a title for the next Pet Shop Boys album. I think they should call it *Honestly*. I think 'Honestly' is a very Pet Shop Boys word. Like 'Please', 'Actually', 'Behaviour' and 'Very', it is very serviceable in as much as it manages to convey a variety of meanings all at once. 'Honestly' as in 'sincerely'. 'Honestly!' as in 'I can't believe you just said that!' 'Honestly?' as in 'I don't believe you for a moment'. In fact, it could be the title of the album the Pet Shop Boys never quite got around to recording, but very nearly did.

I am about to suggest this to Neil Tennant when suddenly, he decides to introduce me to another word in the Pet Shop Boys' vocabulary. "There's a song on the b-side of *Go West* called *Shameless*," he tells me as he polishes off the last of the Evian. "The lyric goes, 'We're shameless and we'll do anything for our fifteen minutes of fame, we have no integrity, we're ready to crawl, to obtain celebrity we'll do anything at all'. The song is an anthem to shamelessness, 'shameless' being one of my favourite words anyway. I think you have to be shameless to be in pop music. You have to have some element of shamelessness about you, otherwise you simply couldn't do it. You'd be too embarrassed. For me, being in the Pet Shop Boys has always been a struggle between total embarrassment and total shamelessness."

Listening to the tape of our conversation a few days later, I begin to wonder what the point of this strange confession was. Perhaps it was a reference to Neil Tennant no longer feeling any sense of embarrassment about who he is, that his decision to go public about his private affairs means he has reached that point where he no longer looks back on his life "forever with a sense of shame". Or perhaps I'm reading too much into this. Perhaps it was simply his way of reminding me that he wouldn't normally do this kind of thing. Honestly. ■



STRAIGHT TALKING



behold, the gay pariah

This is the sorry tale of one man who went too far and incurred the wrath of a community. Having made his peace, Jon Ronson offers some advice

IT WAS INEVITABLE that they'd catch up with me sometime, although I'd rather hoped that my crazed attacker would've chosen a more fittingly sleazy location to launch his offensive than the microwave meals island of Marks and Spencer, Islington. I wish he'd been burlier, too. Scarred. I wish there'd been four of him. But, sadly, my war story is essentially wretched: I was manhandled by a small, irate, rather pleasant-looking, lone queen by the macaroni cheese on Thursday afternoon.

This savage event – this 'Black Thursday' as I now like to think of it – occurred five months ago, and three weeks after *Time Out* magazine published my humorous article about the Colin Ireland murders (well, you've got to laugh). The story had chronicled my attempts to crack the case: to be the honey-trap, the enticing

was pondering the macaroni cheese section of M&S when a small, irate gentleman approached me: "Are you Jon Ronson?" he asked. "Yes," I responded. "You are a fucking twat," he said, and manhandled me. There was a scuffle, I was struck solidly in the arm, the vegetarian lasagne was disrupted, the security guard came running, a pensioner gasped. The incident lasted mere seconds, admittedly, but I am a changed man. Now I am proud – and wholly eligible – to join the legions of other great martyrs brutalised for their beliefs: Salman Rushdie, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Terry Waite. Now I can hold my head up high and announce, in fashionable dinner-party situations, that I was violated for my inalienable right of freedom of speech.

Of course, the essential question that the sorry incident raises

The incident lasted just seconds, but I am now eligible to join the legions of martyrs brutalised for their beliefs

chicken standing by the bar of the Coleherne pub pouting seductively to lure the killer from the joint and scoop the first interview.

Subsequently, since publication, there has been a sustained campaign of tetchiness against myself and the editor: well-organised petitions, an irate news piece in the *Pink Paper*, anonymous letters suggesting that I would have 'the shit kicked out of me' if I ever set foot in the Coleherne again. But I wasn't scared. What were they going to do when they finally caught up with me? – I thought courageously. Hit me over the head with a rolled up programme of the latest production of *Die Fledermaus*?

That's the thing about the Coleherne, I comforted myself. The clientele may look like terrifying construction engineers who'd like nothing more than to stamp up and down on your penis in a small attic flat in Muswell Hill, but all this is simply a façade. A cursory glance at the professions of Colin Ireland's Roll Call Of Death reveal that the victims were cooks and theatre directors to a man. And – yes – if you go up close and listen into the conversations in that portentous, darkened Earls Court establishment, you're more likely to hear the clientele discussing the idiosyncrasies of the latest production of *Tosca* than arranging an evening of the collective superglueing of nipples to passing Intercity 125s. So I wasn't scared, I told myself. But it was just bravado, and I knew it secretly. I was scared, a little bit.

The part of the article that caused the most offence – I discovered from the letters – was the final line which suggested that 'serial killers only stalk the lonely, friendless and unattractive. These are people who say: "Well, he may be a crazed psychopath, but least I'll get a lay." My friend Neil, when he read that section, gasped the gasp of a man gazing at a suicide note. "We can take abuse about some things," he said, "but never our appearance. Tell a gay man that he's unattractive, and you're fucked. Believe me. Be afraid."

And so it was on a Thursday afternoon three weeks later that I

is this: am I, a heterosexual, entitled to make fun of gays in the pages of mainstream magazines? I contend that there were no jokes in my article that one gay

man wouldn't say to another over Sol and amyl in the toilets of Cruz 101. After all, you queens are famed for your sense of humour. But does that make it OK?

As a Jew, I enjoy nothing more than an airy, humorous punch in the ribs when it comes from other Jews. Mel Brooks can dress up as a comedy rabbi and whine about his love of gefilte fish while comically rubbing his hands together: and that's funny. But if some blond South Londoner does it – if Jim Davidson does it – then we organise meetings, anxiously discuss the worrying rise of anti-semitism within mainstream culture.

"It's a trend," we say, and furrow our brows. "Today it's jokes, tomorrow it's the desecration of gravestones." And it's the same with you people. One meagre nod towards homophobia – a serial killer with a Judy Garland poster above his bed in *Silence of the Lambs*, a Calvin Klein model who doesn't actively disagree with Shabba Ranks – and you're picketing record stores. This isn't beyond Stonewall – it's beyond logic. Aren't we behaving like sophomoric schoolchildren – laughing at jokes made from within our gang, whilst remaining belligerently stony-faced when somebody else tries to get in on the act? This is the worst sort of élitism – an abused minority closing ranks, behaving like assholes because so many have behaved like assholes to us. What are we? Sacred?

Thus did Zionism rear its ugly head (fuck the Palestinians because the Nazis fucked us); thus did Peter Tatchell suddenly become such an acclaimed showbiz figure. I mean, do you really want a man representing you who possesses all the wit and charm of somebody who goes to meetings entitled 'Poetry As Socialist Political Weapon' and sells SWP posters outside Boots on Brixton High Street on a Saturday morning. What kind of a role model is that? This is what happens. Lighten up, fellas.

Jon Ronson's book, *Clubbed Class – A Guide to Wheedling Your Way into High Society*, is published by Pavilion

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