

When the Sneaker Pimps debut album *Becoming X* was first released, the cover artwork showed a diagram of a piece of electronic componentry, that when used in a radio receiver, would edit out the DJs voice by muting anything that was not music. It seemed the point being made here was the intrinsic value of the music was what really counted; and that any associations with image, personalities and presentation ought to be ignored. And the Pimps' music, a twisted trip-pop creation, sparsely arranged by core members Liam Howe and Chris Comer, with guitar rock touches and groovy beats overlaid by the sultry PJ Harveyesque vocals of Kelli Dayton, did speak for itself.

SNEAKER PIMPS

shifting perceptions

Now, just over a year later, the album has been reissued (with a photograph of the three Sneaker Pimps on the sleeve). In the intervening period, their profile has increased rapidly — they've toured relentlessly across Europe and the USA, been included on *The Saint* soundtrack, and collaborated with Marilyn Manson for the *Spawn* movie soundtrack — so it's perhaps not surprising that the band are not so faceless any more. Kelli, whose singsong Birmingham accent is startlingly different from her sultry singing voice, thinks it's just the way times change.

"Oh, the face, what a difference it makes! [laughs] In England, when electronic music made the first explosion, people loved the idea of the anonymity of it — for so long, we'd had all these silly, exaggerated characters crooning away, and it was almost like punk in the way that people rejected that for this very cold [anonymity]. The pendulum has sort of swung back again — you can make music anonymously if you choose to, but I think at the end of the day people want to associate someone with the music they like to listen to."

It's strange that she should bring up silly, exaggerated characters, particularly in relation to British electronic music, considering the recent mega-success of one group in particular...

"Yeah, yeah [laughter]. Certainly in America, Prodigy wouldn't be as successful as they are without Keith and without that very visual fronting. America's mainstream is usually quite slow... and off the rails music, anything that's not rhythm and blues or white boy rock is frowned upon. In order to actually get yourself heard, sometimes the image is far more important than the music."

Which is also true to an extent in England, where genre association is also about image. The initial buzz surrounding the band was due to a supposed link to the trip-hop genre, a connection which the group had never felt comfortable with, says Kelli.

"When I first joined Chris and Liam, we were just an experiment. They were quite influenced by trip-hop, but I hadn't even heard about Massive Attack or Portishead. I was very into Sonic Youth and PJ Harvey. The main thing about Sneaker Pimps is, we're not any one thing, we're not purists of any sort. Most of us come from not very interesting parts of England where the worst problem we had to face was boredom, rather than a gun in the face or having to rob banks... so what we did was really from us as people."

Which could lead people to believe that the Sneaker Pimps are very peculiar people indeed — the music can be a confusing mix of trad rock 'n' pop, with torchsong elements and dance rhythms. And then there is Kelli's powerful voice, possessing a rich sensuality, singing

rather dispassionate lyrics about suicide and bad sexual encounters.

"We made the album, and it was about visiting the grey area. Not about extremes, love or hate or anger, it was about the area we lived in — the area where you're functioning like a machine, not even thinking half the time how you actually feel. When I'm singing, I'm on another plane really, sort of dreamlike and hardly emotional at all. I think the mix there — sensual vocals and very deadpan matter of fact lyrics — the contrast makes the music more meaningful."

Has there ever been anyone who's taken their interpretation of the 'meaning' to heart, become obsessed, and displayed any psychotic behaviour — stalking or any other unsavoury actions?

"Personally, I've never worried about that. People can have thoughts about you and that doesn't worry me, what they think inside their own heads is entirely up to them. We play music for everybody, be they perverts or freaks, and luckily we've had no really sick people who try and stalk you, 'cause that sort of thing is just so sad."

So nobody's tried to shoot a president to gain your attention, then.

"No, I'd be the one doing that."

Which could be Kelli's punk rock roots showing through. Before she joined Sneaker Pimps, she was vocalist for London-based punk band, the Lumieres. And it's not really such a leap from there to here, considering the performance-based band the Pimps have become. Unlike many that have made the transition from being a predominantly studio and production-based proposition to doing live shows, Sneaker Pimps don't use DAT or sequencers when they play. Instead they added two extra members, and did it traditionally.

"People probably expect this trio who make music in the bedroom, whereas we have actually progressed into something more. Well, we are a live band, we've been touring since the album came out."

Has this left any time to write new material?

"We're not the sort of band who has to come up with an album on the road. We'll do that in our own time, and concentrate on what we're doing at the moment. We'll finish playing live, and then start the next album. We've just done a new song for a Danny Boyle film, *Life's Less Ordinary*, which is released in September. Danny asked us to watch the film and write the theme for it, so we're really excited about that."

And that would be their third contribution to a film soundtrack, so perhaps yet another image perception shift is due. Now, does anybody remember what John Barry or Ennio Morricone looked like?

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