



# BETTER THAN BECKHAM

INTERVIEW BY HARRIS ROSEN

***Gorillaz and Blur's Damon Albarn united The Clash's Paul Simonon, Verve's Simon Tong and legendary Afrobeat drummer Tony Allen to make *The Good, The Bad and the Queen*. It's the first album by their unnamed band. It's so well out-there it's beyond genre description. And, along with a Mandarin opera, Damon rates it way higher than the latest recruit to MLS.***

**What's going on in the U.K. other than rain all the time?**

It does, right? Well, you know what, though? Strangely, in London, we got an enormous problem with water shortage and every summer it gets kind of closer to not having any water. There's such density of housing and building now in the south-east of England that we've got serious problems with water, even though it rains! There is no water. It's just another example of world resources being badly managed.

**Have you seen *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Al Gore movie?**

I haven't seen that yet, no. I don't know if I want to see yet another depressing thing.

**What about your man Beckham going to L.A.?**

My man Beckham? He's not really my man, you know. I'm Chelsea. To be honest with you, he lives a very self-obsessed life and I don't really relate to it at all. I suppose somebody has to behave like that, but you know it's very vain, his life, very vain. Not in vain, but vain, very much about image and everything. It's certainly got nothing to do with football, going to play in L.A.

**So you'd pass if, for some reason, Chelsea tried to pick him up?**

Nah, nah nah. I've never really been a Beckham fan. He's not that brilliant a footballer, really. He's just very good at passing, in terms of the ball.

**Kudos on the album. The players on this project run pretty deep. You can't get much deeper than working with the Black President.**

No, you can't, really. It's amazing. The connections and where people like Tony influenced American black music back in the days...I think I'm blessed mate, is really what happened. You know, people like James Brown kind of almost simultaneously took both rhythms and turned them into funk. It's nice that these lines exist from such sort of disparate basis. It all kind of comes together. With this record we sort of allowed a lot of that to happen. Tony and I had done three albums together: one in my studio, which was just me and him and more kind of sketches and abstractions; then we went and tried to make it a very kind of 'full' record in Lagos, in the Old Decca Studio there, Afrodisia. We had twenty musicians, some young and some older than Tony. We made another album there, but it still didn't feel different enough. So we came back here and started another whole set of songs. Paul came

into the picture and once we were all just four of us simply playing together there was a sort of tension in what Tony and Paul were trying to find - you know, a common language, they have very different approaches to music - but we found it eventually, and that's really why this album exists. Because we did find that eventually, and it takes maybe five years and a lot of mistakes.

**Does Tony ever break down some crazy stories?**

Oh my god, sometimes. I've never sort of ceased to be amazed at how much Tony has actually done, you know? Paul McCartney came down to Lagos to play a bit, James Brown, you know what I mean? It's just like he's been around everyone, really. Obviously I wanted to know about, uh, Fela's wives and how that arrangement worked. As any man would. It sounds like heaven. Have you seen that *Music Is A Weapon* DVD? He's got the most memorable scene where he's sitting at home in electric-blue swimming trunks on a throne smoking and it's, like, all these women and guys in the room and there's this one guy in the corner just completely stoned and staring at his trunks. Every time I see it I look at this guy's face and it looks like he's thinking, 'How did he do it?' Tony has lived a remarkable life. He's the best person to tell it.

**And does Paul tell lots of stories from his days with The Clash?**

He's had a colorful life as well. It's brilliant, you know. It's nice being on the tour bus and everyone is there to tell their stories. I loved it, lots of good stories.

**Other than that scene, what puts a smile on your face?**

A hug from my daughter.

**And musically? What's next for you? Another Gorillaz album? Another Blur record? Another record by this unnamed band?**

At the moment, just to complicate things even further, I'm sort of in the latter stages of putting the score together for a new opera, which I'm sort of writing and collaborating on. It's all in Mandarin and it's based on the ancient story of a monkey, that went out a monkey king. Pilgrims progress across China, life or death, it's like 2000 years old, a fantastic story, like the original wizard of Oz.

**How are you writing it in Mandarin?**

Funnily enough, I'm not. I don't really need to worry about that because Chinese language - every

syllable so to speak, the nature of it - is very singular, so it's not that hard to place over melodies. If you're writing an opera, it seems to me that the music is the primary importance and the words tend to fit around the music. So it's not like I'm really writing the words because they've already been written centuries ago. I'm kind of sort of putting abstractions to it.

**Is Mr. Mouse working on this with you?**

No, he's not actually, because it's not a record, it's an opera. I'll be very interested to hear what he thinks of it. I hope we can find time to make another record soon together, because I really enjoy working with him. He's fantastic, a great man, I love him. He's a pop star now, so what can you do?

**Speaking of pop stars, what's your take on the recent shake up at your label, EMI?**

EMI needs to survive, but it also needs to invest heavily in new talent and allow bands to develop in a way they used to. Not expect massive returns on the first, second, third or even fourth album; just allow them to evolve naturally. So few bands actually make development anymore, they're not really given a chance.

**With the music industry following a more digital road to sales is it still an independent vs. major label thing?**

It's not really to do with the money or anything. I think it's got to do more with the way they approach their bands. I think they need to just relax a bit, and just let people kind of make mistakes and experiment. You know, experimentation is very thin on the ground in popular music and that's a shame because, you know, popular music is what the vast majority of people listen to. So there should be great, great efforts made to make it more complex, more colourful, more stimulating and rewarding. I was given a chance to develop and I am very, very lucky to have come at a time when you were still able to do that.