



ALL SAINTS

FIVE ALBUMS IN AND ALL SAINTS ARE BACK WITH A CAREER-BEST RECORD – TESTAMENT. THE QUARTET TALK TO CLASSIC POP ABOUT THEIR UNCOMPROMISING RETURN, ESCAPING LIFE IN THE POP GOLDFISH BOWL AND LEARNING TO DEAL WITH THE PRESSURES THAT ONCE DROVE THEM APART. **STEVE HARNELL**



"WE DIDN'T
CONFORM TO THE RULES.
THE WAY THE FOUR OF US
ARE DIFFERENT, MADE
OUR MUSIC DIFFERENT."

NATALIE
APPLETON

All Saints have always stood out from the girl-group crowd. Having more in common with the R&B sleekness of Soul II Soul or the nascent Massive Attack and Neneh Cherry, the only thing they shared with chart competitors such as The Spice Girls was the endless promo merry-go-round they endured in their early days.

Fast-forward two decades and they've resolved to do everything on their own terms. Their fifth studio album *Testament* is the group's most consistently striking work to date and they're now heading out on a winter tour – full-length headlining live dates to replace the smash-and-grab TV appearances of their first two LPs.

They've endured a much-publicised split and are now in the midst of a hugely successful second act. As *Classic Pop* spends the morning with the foursome in sun-drenched, leafy North West London, it's clear the group are closer than ever. The niggles that once drove them apart are a mere footnote, as they look back with the benefit of hindsight on their band dynamic.

There's a good deal more transparency about the way that All Saints have gone about their business when compared to many of their more

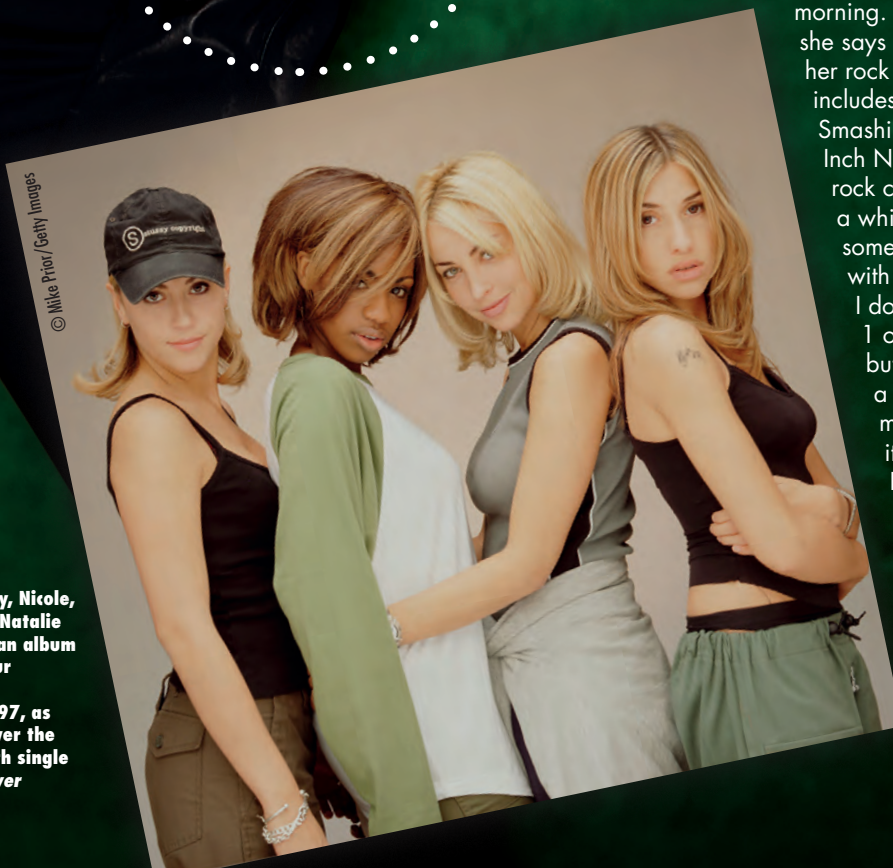
showbizzy peers; they're four very different personalities, each bringing something distinct to the table. Natalie Appleton explains: "We definitely didn't fit into that cookie-cutter mould of manufactured bands. I think that's why we always felt like outsiders. We didn't conform to the rules. The way the four of us are different, made our music different. We were never going to fit into any one single category, although we were certainly influenced by bands like En Vogue, SWV and TLC originally."

PARTY STREAMERS

As we meet at their management HQ, they've just compiled separate Spotify playlists, giving an insight into their musical tastes. Shaznay Lewis's hip-hop flavoured selection cherrypicks Beastie Boys, Public Enemy, A Tribe Called Quest and Wu-Tang Clan, while Natalie's 80s classics include George Michael, Oran "Juice" Jones, Duran Duran and Frankie Goes To Hollywood – Nat, your *Classic Pop* subscription is in the post...

Meanwhile, Mel Blatt's mix of current and retro R&B features The Internet and Chloe x Halle, alongside classics from Sade and Janet Jackson. It's Mel that still keeps an ear on cratedigging for current sounds: "I'm a bit nerdy. A bit of a boffin," she shrugs. "I like finding out what's going on out there, especially when artists I admire put up their own choices in music they're listening to."

Nicole Appleton has heard her own playlist over her gym's PA that morning. "It went down brilliantly!" she says with no little pride about her rock and grunge selection that includes Nirvana, Soundgarden, Smashing Pumpkins and Nine Inch Nails. She's not exclusively a rock chick, though: "It takes me a while, but once I latch onto something I become obsessed with it. Like Ariana Grande. I don't actually listen to Radio 1 or anything that's current, but I do appreciate it. I have a 17-year-old son who plays me stuff and I just don't get it. He's into lots of grime. But I don't know who sings what. There's a lot of great stuff out there, but I'm just not on the ball with who's who and who sings what. Even with female solo artists..."



Above: Shaznay, Nicole, Melanie and Natalie are back with an album and tour

Inset: In 1997, as they take over the pop world with single *Never Ever*



"WITH THE NEW POP STARS, YOU'VE GOT ABSOLUTELY NO IDEA WHAT THEY'RE LIKE. THEY ALL BLEND INTO ONE."

SHAZNAY LEWIS

THE ORIGIN STORY

We can thank one of this month's Godfathers Of Pop for setting All Saints in motion. After meeting Shaznay at a party in London, Ben Volpeliere-Pierrot of Curiosity Killed The Cat later whisked her off to Metamorphosis recording studios on All Saints Road to work on some backing vocals. It was at the London studio that Lewis later bumped into Mel Blatt. The pair eventually formed the first incarnation of their band, All Saints 1.9.7.5, with Simone Rainford. Groomed to be successors to Eternal's soul-pop throne, the trio signed to ZTT Records in 1993 but their first two singles didn't dent the charts. Rainford had departed by mid 1995 and Blatt invited schoolfriend and fellow pupil from the Sylvia Young Theatre School, Nicole Appleton, into the band. Nic's sister Natalie was the final member to join the group, now snappily rechristened All Saints...

TALK THE TALK

Unafraid to speak their own minds, All Saints are a world away from the current crop of media-trained pop stars who shy away from stating their opinions. "Could that be an explanation of the resurgence of why people are going back to old eras?" offers Shaznay. "When we were teenagers, or younger in the 90s, there weren't loads of bands from the 70s and 80s going on tours. That's very much a 'now' thing. Is that because of social media?"

"People don't have to be offensive, but it would be good if they were just seen to be passionate, you know?" adds Nic.

He may have blotted his copybook, but even Nicole's ex-husband Liam Gallagher gets the nod of approval over the current bland generation. Her sister Natalie adds: "It's refreshing when someone has a character. I enjoy it when Liam G says outrageous things. He can get away with it." (Nic rolls her eyes, knowingly.)

Are those great rent-a-quote characters largely missing with pop artists afraid that an unpopular opinion will go viral and send their careers into a nosedive? It's taken



Taylor Swift several years to finally voice her own political opinions: "I think that's why you get to know reality stars nowadays more than pop stars, because you're seeing them in certain environments," says Shaz.

"Whether they're saying good things, bad things, whatever, at least they're saying something. Whereas with the new pop stars, you've got absolutely no idea what they're like. They all blend into one."

"You don't know anything about them – then suddenly they're a heroin addict," laughs Mel. "Where the fuck did that come from!?"

"Remember back in the day, Britney was like that. Her interviews were very safe and she didn't say much of any substance. Now she's come out of her shell. It's nice to see her real self, rather than what she's been told to be like," adds Nic.

The topic of George Michael's resolute digging in of heels around *Listen Without Prejudice Vol. 1* comes up. Although the quartet were more strong-willed than most, that level of artistic intransigence was still a step too far. Shaznay explains: "You have to be an artist that big and have that much power to be able to make a statement like that. I don't think a band like us could ever have got away with it. We certainly tried! We asked: 'Can we not be in our videos?' Can we not be on the cover?"

"That's when you've got to go right to the source of the whole thing and put the creatives with business. It's never going to work, really, because you're never gonna get a creative's full potential – because there's a business involved, a pricetag. Other people are making money from that creativity. So even when the artist needs



All Saints may have been candid about their bust-ups in the past, but the camaraderie is clearly back

a break or wants to stop, there's a whole company of thousands of people that need to get paid. It can never truly work, that relationship. Which is why I think we're really lucky now that we made the decision to try to do this for ourselves."

THE VOICE IN MY HEAD WAS RIGHT

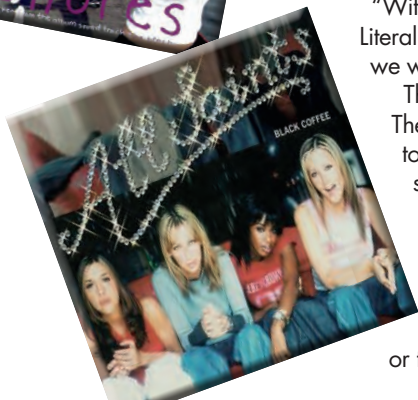
The band's superb new album *Testament* distils everything we've grown to love about the foursome over the past 20 years, but also pushes their sound forwards.

"The main thing that we wanted to do our way was the new record itself," explains Shaznay, the Ivor Novello Award-winning chief songwriter in the group. "When we made our albums beforehand, tied to a label, it was all based on sales and being in that environment. I don't think we made the best albums that we could. I think we've made better albums under our own umbrella. We compromised a lot back in the day, but we were young. You're being asked by the biggest A&R people in the country to come up with hits and that's all they're concentrating on.

"By the time we got to our second album [2000's *Saints & Sinners*], you don't actually trust your own ears, and you think they should know better. But that's not actually how it should be

POP_UP The distinctive guitar part for All Saints' cover of Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Under The Bridge* was provided by Richard Hawley. The one-time member of Longpigs and Pulp is now a much-loved singer-songwriter in his own right, with seven studio albums under his belt.





New song *After All* is a return to the All Saints fold for producer William Orbit, who oversaw huge 2000 hits *Pure Shores* and *Black Coffee*

POP UP During All Saints' hiatus, all four members scored hits outside the group – Mel made No.6 with the Artful Dodger and the single *Twentyfourseven*; Shaznay reached No.8 with debut solo effort *Never Felt Like This Before*; while as Appleton, Nicole and Natalie had two Top Five entries with *Don't Worry and Fantasy*.

either. An artist should be making the music that they want to make, and if it fails, then it fails. At least it's made authentically. Having said that, I feel actually that there hasn't been a lot of things we've had to say no to. Because of the music we've made, the right things have come along with it."

"With *Testament*, we funded it ourselves.

Literally, we've been left to do exactly what we want to do with it," Natalie adds.

The album is awash with highlights. There's a knowing nod to the iconic intro to *Never Ever*, with Nic reprising her spoken-word role on *Who Do You Love*, but *Testament*, is, well, testament to a group who are resolutely striding into the future with a forward-thinking agenda. There's nothing nostalgic about club banger *Three Four*, or the pulsing electro pop of *Love Lasts Forever*. All Saints fans have been excited by one retro nod, though – the return of William Orbit, the man behind two of their biggest successes, *Pure Shores* and *Black Coffee*, who provides his trademark twinkling electro soundscapes on new track *After All*.

The two songs that Orbit features on mark the first time he's hooked up with the quartet since their second album. *Testament* has been welcomed by their fans and is winning them a younger audience, too. "It's so easy to be filled with doubt about 'judgy eyes' and judgy ears. The fact that it's gone down

alright is a huge relief," says Mel.

Once more, the lynchpin behind the mixing desk is producer and de facto fifth All Saint, Karl Gordon, aka long-term collaborator K-Gee. "He really is the root of everything," explains Nat. "He's the thread that goes back to the beginning. It's just a relationship that really works, you know. Whoever comes in brings something different, but ultimately, he's the thread that [binds our sound together]."

"In the beginning, most of the demos that we brought to the label for our first album were done with K-Gee apart from *Never Ever*. But at that time, it was the start of Karl's career, so in 'industry world', the kind of very urban music that he was bringing, I suppose the labels just wanted to add a commercial edge to it, or a leftfield edge to it when we talk about people like Cameron McVey. But it was always Karl's music. Even if someone else was brought in to help on it, it was Karl's stuff," adds Shaz.

Behind the mixing desk on their eponymous debut was a veritable *Who's Who* of UK urban producers – Nellee Hooper and Cameron McVey helped shape Massive Attack's seminal *Blue Lines* (Hooper was also a key member of Soul II Soul for their first two albums), and Jon Douglas, who also worked with George Michael on his comeback LP, *Older*. Douglas had worked with Shaznay and Mel from their earliest days in the music industry when signed to ZTT.

"IT'S EASY TO BE FILLED WITH DOUBT ABOUT 'JUDGY EYES' AND 'JUDGY EARS'. THE FACT THAT THE ALBUM'S GONE DOWN ALRIGHT IS A HUGE RELIEF."

MELANIE BLATT



TAKE NELLE TO THE BEACH

On *Testament*, there's an intriguing blend of established producers (K-Gee, William Orbit) alongside cutting-edge talents such as Pete 'Hutch' Hutchings and Fred Ball. Key to the success of the new record is Lewis's team-up with George Moore on the writing and production front. Shaznay explains: "The more established people that we've worked with in the past, that's a comfort. George Moore happens to be our band MD. We're always up for working with new people if they're bringing interesting sounds and ideas to the table. Once their ideas are things that we can work with and put our own stamp on, that's always something we're up for."

He may have been the go-to producer in the 90s, but it seems that Nellee Hooper, the man behind classic hits for Madonna, Björk, Sinéad O'Connor and U2 is still missing in action, revelling in the hard-won spoils of victory on a far-flung beach.

"We'd love to get Nellee back, but he's always on his holidays all the time! I think he's just enjoying the fruits of his labour, to be honest," says Mel. "You know, sometimes people come out of retirement, but I'd love to work with Nellee again," adds Nat.

Following the critical and commercial success of their second comeback album *Red Flag*, *Testament* seals the deal. To quote the bard Barlow,

they're back for good... the road back, though, after their initial split in 2001, wasn't always smooth.

Their much-underrated first attempt at a return, 2006's ska- and reggae-tinged *Studio 1*, was a false dawn. Mel was the most reluctant member to restart the band and admitted that the money on the table was the primary reason she agreed to a reunion: "It's not so much the music on *Studio 1* that I was critical of, it's more how it came about that I had issues with," she shrugs. "It's



THE ALBUMS

ALL SAINTS

LONDON RECORDS (1997)

The killer debut that in *Never Ever* boasts the second-biggest-selling girl-group single of all time in the UK, only bettered by the Spice Girls' *Wannabe*. The track also won All Saints two BRIT Awards. Six songs were released from the tracklisting, racking up three No. 1s – for *Never Ever*, *Under The Bridge/Lady Marmalade* and the sauce-fest *Bootie Call*.



SAINTS & SINNERS

LONDON RECORDS (2000)

The imperious dream pop of chart-topping lead single *Pure Shores* ushered in All Saints' second LP. Producer William Orbit also had a hand in its follow-up, *Black Coffee* (another No. 1). Friction led to a break in February 2001 so they "could clear the air between themselves". The band wouldn't set foot inside a studio again for another five years...



STUDIO 1

PARLOPHONE (2006)

Due for a critical reappraisal, the tougher-sounding third album has reggae and ska flavours, hence the title's namecheck of the legendary Jamaican label. The LP failed to capitalise on the success of first single *Rock Steady*, but there's plenty of fine material, including the spiky *Chick Fit*, woozy good-time vibe of *Scar* and the dubby *Not Eazy*.



RED FLAG

LONDON (2016)

Returning to the electro-meets-R&B vibe of their imperial phase, *Red Flag* is where new-era All Saints really come into their own. *One Strike* is among their finest singles; Chris Martin would kill for the juggernaut chorus of *One Woman Man* and the sweetly laidback *Summer Rain* proves a nice counterpoint. There's plenty of firepower elsewhere, too...



TESTAMENT

AS RECORDINGS (2018)

Playing to the Saints' strengths throughout, *Testament* blends trademark harmonies, instantly hooky songs and some forward-thinking arrangements and textures. From the breathy drama of opener *Who Do You Love* through to the dancefloor-friendly attack of *Three Four* and anthemic *Love Lasts Forever*, there's no slipping on the quality threshold.



just not an album that I can relate to. We were signed before we even made a demo for it. The [record label] didn't know what we were capable of at that point. We should have come back with a jazz-skiffle album, just to piss them off."

When second single *Chick Fit* failed to reach the Top 200, record label Parlophone parted ways with the group. Promotional duties were scrapped. So, too, was a planned UK tour. The reunion stalled before getting out of the starting blocks.

That might have been it for All Saints, were it not for a chance phonecall from Backstreet Boys, who in November 2014 offered them a support slot on their five-date UK tour the following year.

It planted the seed that perhaps here was a way for the quartet to ease themselves back into the limelight and



THE AUDIO ARCHITECTS



K-GEE

Effectively the fifth member of All Saints, Karl 'K-Gee' Gordon has been a lynchpin in the group since the beginning. Co-writing numerous tracks with Shaznay, he's also contributed his production skills to each of their five studio albums. The All Saints story would be very different without him...



WILLIAM ORBIT

After giving Madonna a much-needed artistic boost for her *Ray Of Light* album, Orbit brought his ethereal electro soundscapes to All Saints' chart-topping *Pure Shores* single and repeated the trick for its follow-up, *Black Coffee*. He reunited with the band 18 years later for two tracks on the new LP, *After All* and *Testament In Motion*.



GEORGE MOORE

All Saints' MD and now a co-writer and producer on four tracks on the new LP, including excellent opener *Who Do You Love*, glitchy *No Issues* and the soulful lurch of *Don't Look Over Your Shoulder*.



FRED BALL

London-based but Norwegian-born, this Grammy-nominated producer worked on *Testament* closer *Footprints*. His bulging CV already includes the likes of Madonna, Rihanna, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Little Mix and Jessie Ware.



"YOU KNOW, SOMETIMES PEOPLE COME OUT OF RETIREMENT, I'D LOVE TO WORK WITH NELLEE HOOPER AGAIN"

NATALIE APPLETON

power up the All Saints mothership once again. "When that opportunity came about, we jumped at it because we hadn't really toured or done that many live shows in the past," Shaznay explains. "Just to have that opportunity and not have the responsibility of selling the show or promoting it... just to go out there and do a 45-minute set, it was great."

MOTHERS OF INVENTION

Now all mothers, the foursome are continually asked about the realities of having a family while being in a touring pop band. It's not something journalists would ask of Coldplay or Muse, but this potentially sexist line of questioning could be seen as proof of the centrality of mothers in the family unit. "People don't ask Liam and Maxim about it!" exclaims Nat of The Prodigy's on-the-road setup. Shaznay adds: "For us especially to be able to walk out of the door and do what we do, we've got to get things covered. I can't just get up and say to my other half: 'Babe, I'm off on tour with the girls. See you in two weeks'. It doesn't work like that. Every aspect of our childrens' lives has to be covered before we can even get one foot out of the door."

The everyday challenges of family life may have put the members' own personal differences into perspective. Suffocated inside the pop goldfish bowl of the 90s and early 2000s, their split was bitter. Their candour about it has been refreshing, but equally impressive has been the way that they've put their issues behind them. You see them lolling together on their manager's sofa and you'd be amazed they'd ever had a crossword in 20 years-plus...



Natalie onstage at BBC Radio 2 Live In Hyde Park in September 2018

**NELLEE HOOPER**

The go-to man for classy hip-hop and R&B-infused soul in the late 80s and early 90s. A key early member of both the Massive Attack and Soul II Soul soundsystems, Hooper went on to produce Madonna, Björk, No Doubt and U2. He also co-produced Sinéad O'Connor's seminal cover of Prince's *Nothing Compares 2 U*.

**CAMERON McVEY**

Another Massive Attack/*Blue Lines* alumni, Neneh Cherry's other half co-produced *Never Ever*, the band's first-ever No. 1 single. Alongside Four Tet's Kieran Hebden, McVey also has a hand in Cherry's brand-new album, *Broken Politics*.

**JON DOUGLAS**

His fingerprints have been on records that have shifted more than 65 million copies over the years. Cutting his teeth with *Eternal*, Douglas co-produced George Michael's *Older* album and worked on three tracks on All Saints' eponymous debut, *If You Wanna Party (I Found Lovin')*, *Beg* and *Lady Marmalade*.

**GREG KURSTIN**

Last seen providing Liam Gallagher with some pop nous for his debut solo LP, Kurstin produced half of *Studio 1*. Currently crafting hits on a radio near you for the likes of Adele, Sia, Ellie Goulding, Lily Allen and even the Foo Fighters.

**RICK NOWELS**

Making a cameo appearance on *Chick Fit*, Nowels' astonishing track record has seen him write hits for Belinda Carlisle, Lana Del Rey, Adele, Rod Stewart and Fleetwood Mac. Won the 2004 Ivor Novello Award for International Hit Of The Year thanks to Dido's *White Flag*.

"Our humour has stayed the same, which is a big thing for us," Nic explains. "It's what makes us happy and helps us to enjoy going to work together. We laugh 90 per cent of the time. We'd get a lot more done if we didn't. We always had the sense of humour, but there were a lot more things going on in the background."

"There are still niggly things, but it's the way you deal with them now that's important," Shaz adds diplomatically. "At such a young age, you don't always see the bigger picture – we weren't playing the long game. 20 years down the line, you actually appreciate that long game. Unlike a lot of bands, we were actually best mates, too. So after we finished working in the day, we'd go out partying together. We were in each other's lives constantly. There was never any chance to take a step back and look at the situation."

"I've known Mel since she was really little, then having to have this business relationship as equals, it became really weird. It changed the dynamic," says Nat. "We had to deal with business, but then I view Mel [and Nic] as my two little sisters. We'd have definitely lasted longer if there wasn't that pressure-cooker feeling on us."

"I kinda like our naivety about the whole thing, though," argues Mel. "The fact that we decided to end the band because we fell out, we didn't get on any more. Money couldn't have made us stay together. They tried that, but we sent the money back. That's something I'm very proud of. I'd have appreciated all four of us having someone trustworthy as an outside party who had our best interests at heart. Someone who advised us to watch our friendship, other than worrying about the business side. I think if someone had advised



us to do that, we'd have listened. Nobody was just interested in us as four friends, there was always a business angle attached to it."

With a little experience, too, comes the realisation the live shows won't be packed with high-octane dance routines. Even back in the day, though, All Saints preferred their textbook shoulder roll to the full-on choreography of their chart rivals. "In the beginning, we did a bit of choreography... before we got bad knees," laughs Nic. "Now it's more about singing. We want to make sure that instead of jumping around and getting a stitch, we get the performance right. We still do the shoulder roll..."

"I think at this stage of the game we know where our strengths are at," adds Mel, "and big choreography is not what we are going to win at!" ■

"OUR HUMOUR HAS STAYED THE SAME, WHICH IS A BIG THING FOR US. IT'S WHAT MAKES US HAPPY AND HELPS US TO ENJOY GOING TO WORK TOGETHER."

NICOLE APPLETON

● **Testament is out now on AS Recordings. All Saints tour the UK from 29 November to 12 December. Visit allsaintsofficial.co.uk/tour for more details.**

POP UP Nicole and Natalie's 2003 duo album *Everything's Eventual* was named after a collection of 14 Stephen King short stories – Natalie is a massive fan of the legendary horror and suspense writer.

