

Once you pop, you can't stop

NORMAL SERVICE HAS BEEN RESUMED. AFTER THEIR ONE-TIME ONLY REUNION TOUR WITH SIOBHAN FAHEY, BANANARAMA ARE BACK WITH THEIR FIRST STUDIO ALBUM IN 10 YEARS. SARA DALLIN AND KEREN WOODWARD TALK ABOUT POP'S UPLIFTING POWER, PATTI SMITH AND RA-RA SKIRT-WEARING TRAUMA.

STEVE HARNELL

Back to the core duo – Bananarama's Keren Woodward (left) and Sara Dallin (right)
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Bananarama are jet-lagged but exultant. Keren Woodward and Sara Dallin have just returned from a storming show in San Diego and are about to endure a long-haul marathon flight to Australia for a string of gigs Down Under. In the meantime, there's also the small matter of a video shoot to crowbar in. If they thought their return as a duo would be dialled down a little from the headline-grabbing exploits of their recent reunion with Siobhan Fahey, then they'll have to think again.

With their first studio album in a decade about to make its way blinking into the pop sunlight, we meet in the chic environs of a French brasserie in Soho's Old Compton Street, just a stone's throw away from the G.A.Y. club where they played an historic one-off reunion show with Siobhan back in 2002. Amid the clinking glasses and cappuccino slurps of the West End's assembled brunchers, the pair are friendly but businesslike; a no-nonsense approach that's seen them through almost 40 years on pop's frontline.

A Stateside flavour

Could *In Stereo* have ended up with a country and western influence akin to Kylie's *Golden*? An off-hand remark by Sara a while back hinted that Bananarama were heading to Nashville to pen the new album. Sara laughs when she recalls the on-camera moment when the duo appeared on a celebrity version of TV show *Pointless*: "We said that a long time ago. We'd been watching [US drama] *Nashville* and I loved the process of how they write – it's so melodic with lots of harmonies – I thought that would suit us but we didn't have a record deal so it's difficult making that idea work..."

"We once did a writing session with a guy who worked with Prince [David Z]. He was used to recording with artists like Apollonia 6 and those sort of girl bands, but it just didn't suit us. We couldn't sing anything he came up with. I don't have that sort of soulful voice. It was a diabolical embarrassment."

Keren was equally aghast at their process: "They wanted to record us virtually one syllable at a time to get this absolutely perfect vocal! So you just end up with no life in the finished take. We just lost the will to live. We like to just go in, sing it, maybe sing it again and then go, 'That'll be alright!'"

They've already moved on from the almost overwhelming response to their Original Line Up Tour, polishing off new knowingly-titled duo album *In Stereo* in its lustrous afterglow. It's a reassertion of the pair's strengths and crystallisation of the latter-era sound of *Drama* and *Viva*, although Sara is quick to point out that writing a box-ticking fan-pleasing album was never on the agenda. "If you do that you get it wrong," she notes firmly. "You have to do what comes naturally. I can't write to order in a certain style. Essentially, we write pure pop songs. Songs that mean something to us."

"Because of our harmonies and the way we sing, the album's instantly identifiable as us. It was a very easy record to make – very, very pop, very Blondie-ish. It's also very electro-pop, which we love. Those two styles blend together really well."

Precision-tooled hitmaker Richard X is on board for the pulsing electro of the opening title track (first recorded by original Sugababes members under their Mutya Keisha Siobhan incarnation), but it's regular 'Nanas collaborator Ian Masterson – co-songwriter, producer and multi-instrumentalist – who has the firmest hand on the tiller. Co-writing the remaining nine songs with Sara and Keren, he's behind the none-more-Ronseal titled *Dance Music*, a Goldfrapp-esque album standout with an Italo house piano house flourish that sees Keren and Sara heading back to the clubs – in their heads at least.

"We don't go to clubs so much now obviously,"



The original trio of Keren, Sara and Siobhan reformed in 2017 to play dates in the UK, US and Europe



adds Sara by way of explanation. "But if we're abroad then there's that dance element around. The influence on that song wasn't explicitly an Ibiza one but Ian picks up on that type of music and made a backing track for us. We just performed it live in the States as a taster for the new album."

It's been many fans' first experience of *In Stereo* and was initially made available as a pre-order download. "We didn't want people's first experience of the album to be on an iPhone or on YouTube," adds Sara.

ADVENTURES IN STEREO

The completion of *In Stereo* was a stop-start affair. Recording had been well underway before sessions were put on the backburner, giving way to the surprise reunion tour with Siobhan.

"Writing with Ian is kind of an ongoing process," explains Sara. "You never really know when anything's going to be released. We did an EP [*Now Or Never*] in 2012, I think, and a Christmas single, bits and pieces. This time, though, it felt that it was a really great time to release the album, particularly following the [reunion] tour. Obviously we had stuff already written."

"We added a few extras just to complete it but we had quite a lot of songs finished with Ian already," adds Keren who is also pleased that the duo are now more in control of their own destiny than ever before. "We decided for once in our lives that we'd like to own the album and do it all ourselves," she explains. "With our back catalogue, apart from a couple of albums, which we do now own, the record company paid for the recording and they own them. It's nice to have control now."

After the enormous shows undertaken on the reunion tour, there's a change of tack for the new album. Fans will get the chance to get up close and



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personal with Sara and Keren via five gigs at intimate venues that will include Q&A segments – perfect for these once shy girls who've gradually upped the banter rate at gigs.

Keren explains that although the format of the shows has yet to be fine-tuned, they're keen to tinker with the traditional gig concept: "We'll do quite a few songs from the new album at the Q&A, though we're still working out exactly what the format of the shows will be. We might mix in questions with the songs, almost like an 'Audience With'-style show. That's kinda what we did in San Diego the other night. It just seemed very natural to stop and chat with the audience."

"At the reunion shows with Siobhan, we had a little bit of banter between us. If you're in the right sized venue, you can have a nice rapport with the audience, which you can't do when you're playing the festival-type events where the front row is so far away."

"I QUITE ENJOY WINNING PEOPLE OVER AT FESTIVALS. WHAT WE GET RIGHT ACROSS THE BOARD IS PEOPLE SAYING, 'I FORGOT YOU HAD ALL OF THOSE HITS!'"

KEREN WOODWARD



On stage with Siobhan Fahey on the 2017 reunion tour

"That said, I quite enjoy winning people over at festivals, because we always manage to do it. What we get right across the board is people saying, 'I forgot you had all of those hits!'"

"For the April shows we won't just concentrate on the obvious hits. We're taking a new band with us on tour as our regular guys aren't available, so it's impossible to rehearse every hit and then every song you *might* want to do, too. It would take forever, so we'll hone it down. It's the first time we've had a whole new band with us for many years now, so that's exciting."

THE GRAND TOUR

As a live act, Bananarama's currency has never been greater. Their Original Line Up Tour shows – 25 in the UK, five in the US, a few in Europe and a clutch of festivals – navigated that fine line between celebrating their back catalogue but not dipping into cloying nostalgia. Key to its charm, too, was that its big league production values didn't swamp the DIY informal charms of the trio. When *Classic Pop* caught them at their almost-hometown show in Bristol, it felt – with absolutely no insult intended – like a massive hen night piss-up.

"We didn't want it to be over-polished with loads of dance routines," says Sara, "That's not really our thing. We're very 'take us as you find us'. There is no rulebook as to how you should perform."

"Apart from our huge gay following we've always had loads of female fans. Even when we were much younger, girls loved it because there were so few women around for them to look up to. I think that's why we were important to them."

"Siobhan was with us for six years but she never experienced touring while in the band."

We toured after she left, but we didn't perform with a live band with her at all. It wasn't the done thing back then. Then we went on a world tour with Jacquie [O'Sullivan].

We didn't do it the first time around because it was more the age of video."

A centrepiece of the reunion show was a lump-in-the-throat performance of Shakespears Sister's No. 1 gloom-pop gem *Stay*. With the trio holding hands and saluting a giant video screen, it pushed all the right emotional buttons. "That was our ideal!" beams Keren. "When we first mentioned it to Siobhan she doubted whether it would work. We made it our own, though, and did it how

it suited us with our harmonies. I really enjoyed doing that song."

Reaction across the board was exceptional, and both Keren and Sara were overwhelmed at the response to the trio shows. The latter explains: "We play a lot of live shows and people always go crazy, there's always an audience there. But this was going to be special because people had never seen the three of us together and probably won't again, so it really was an amazing one-off experience."

"The love and the comments were just astonishing. The show was fantastic. A lot of money went into it so it looked great. It was nostalgic and it was fun. It was everything you could want for a night out I think." Sara pauses. "Well, maybe not everything!" she laughs with a nudge and a wink.

New material was floated in the media but being in the centre of the hurricane left no time for writing or recording. Keren's quick to point out that fresh trio material was essentially a non-starter: "There wasn't time really but we'd already been working on stuff [as a duo]. That was a one-off tour and we'd almost finished the album. It was a good time to do the tour and the right time for Siobhan, too. She loved it, we all did. Our feet didn't really touch the ground. We didn't have enough time to record another album. We'd have had to take another six months or a year out. In the future, who knows, there might be a one-off gig but I can't see it at this point in time."

"Bananarama has been almost three decades as a duo so for us it's very natural," adds Sara. "But revisiting it was a brilliant experience, we had a great time, we love Siobhan to death and it was what it was. A lot of groups do the 'last ever tour' thing but that's not us."

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST

There's a winning lack of formality about Keren and Sara, both onstage and off. Slick choreographed dance routines have never been their bag, borne from the DIY ethic of the punk scene from which they sprang. It's been a long journey, though, from the squat culture of their earliest days to the slick and refined electro-pop of the current incarnation.

"We just did what came naturally," explains Keren with a shrug about their first steps as a band. "We didn't go to stage school and didn't have stylists. We weren't schooled in how to behave in front of the television cameras, it was all just very new and exciting. I know it's amateur, but how else would it be when you were just 19?"

Sara has similar feelings about Bananarama's earliest days on stage: "You can feel that we were just getting up and doing what we wanted to do. It's how we felt watching bands in the punk era. The first artists



"I'm a lumberjack and I'm OK, I sleep all night and I work all day...!"

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I loved were Debbie Harry and Patti Smith. Debbie, in particular, looked great but edgy. That had a big influence on us. And I just loved Patti's music."

Despite growing up amid Bristol's burgeoning punk scene, the West Country city held little attraction for the teenage Keren and Sara who were desperate to escape for the bright lights of London as soon as they could. They caught The Police and The Clash in their home city but the capital soon came calling... "We were still quite punky when we left home," adds Keren. "We always played music, though. We made a lot of tapes of ourselves singing – comedy tapes, made-up plays. That's what we did in

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SARA DALLIN

The beats generation

Think you know all of Bananarama's deep cuts? How about a hook-up with hip-hop royalty that Sara and Keren were hardly even aware of themselves? Woodward laughs when she recalls the making of *Invincible*, a solo single by Rev Run of Run-DMC which featured the chorus of *Na Na Hey Hey (Kiss Him Goodbye)* nestling alongside some motormouth mic skills by the rap legend. "We had to re-record the vocals. Did that actually come out? It obviously wasn't a big hit!" Although the track was originally cut back in 2008,



it only surfaced on iTunes in 2014. Perhaps there's further scope for more big-name collaborations down the line, though. Dallin is a self-professed fan of Timbaland and Daft Punk adding: "They make such experimental tracks – or at least it sounds that way to me. They can shock you with their sound and style, that's the kind of approach I like. I really enjoyed that Nelly Furtado album that she did with Timbaland. It still had pop melodies, but with all his magic on top. I'd love to work with Timbaland, that production sound with those amazing beats."

our school holidays but you never think you'll be able to make a career out of it. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I just wanted to move to London. I was sick of school and didn't want to go to university. I phoned up the BBC thinking I might get into television. It sounded exciting, but it didn't pan out!"

Sara, meanwhile, did have a plan and enrolled at the London College Of Fashion where she studied fashion journalism. It was where she also met Siobhan Fahey. Dallin takes up the story: "I was 18, we lived in the YWCA, and we started going to all these different clubs. Then we met Paul Cook [from the Sex Pistols] by chance and he came to our hostel. This was like 1980 or '81. We became really good friends with him so when they closed our place down he asked us if we'd like to live above his rehearsal room, which doubled up as Malcolm McLaren's office."

Talcy Malcy's office was festooned with glitter vests, Sid Vicious' trousers, props from the Pistols' movie *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle* and even John Lydon's

drawings of Sid and Nancy, which decorated the walls. "It was an amazing place," says Sara with a nostalgic twinkle in her eye. "Paul Cook was probably the first famous person I ever met. He had a band with Steve Jones called The Professionals who used to rehearse downstairs. We did backing vocals for them and for Department S. It was amazing for us teenagers, we were like their mascots!"

"Our beginnings as a trio were quite fortuitous. Paul didn't put the group together, but the fact that Keren and I were going to the rehearsal rooms and staying there meant that we were constantly meeting all



With the Fun Boy Three in 1982. Yes, that is Terry Hall with a smile on his face...

these musicians. We used to go to a club called Music Machine, which is now KOKO; we just met loads of people through Paul. Siobhan wasn't really part of our circle of friends at that point, she was dating someone from Stiff Little Fingers. They lived in Wardour Street. It's hard to remember when it all came together, I dunno, it just sorta happened."

FUN GIRL THREE

And sorta happen it did. After Siobhan joined and they completed the final part of the jigsaw puzzle, the trio sang backing vocals for the likes of Iggy Pop and The Style Council, before releasing the experimental Burundi beat-influenced *Aie A Mwana*, Swahili lyrics 'n all. But their biggest break came when former Specials frontman Terry Hall spotted them in fashion bible *The Face* and invited them to feature on Fun Boy Three's debut album. The girls contributed to four tracks including the hit singles *It Ain't What You Do (It's The Way That You Do It)* and *Really Saying Something*. Sheepishly glowering from behind vast swathes of fringe, their collective star was on the rise.

"The Fun Boy Three sound feeds into our first album. Malcolm McLaren picked up on the Burundi rhythms, too," explains Sara. "That band were very inspirational to us, especially when they called up to ask if we wanted to sing on their album because they'd seen a picture of us looking really sulky in *The Face*. We thought, 'What the hell are they expecting?'"

There's clearly a lot of affection from Woodward and Dallin towards Hall; if it wasn't for him taking a gamble on them back in the day, the Bananarama story may never have progressed from its early indie beginnings. Far from exuding rock star charisma, Keren recalls that the assembled musicians all seemed to lack self-confidence. "Terry had the same sense of humour as us but was very shy. All of our conversations were conducted from behind masses of hair, then you'd get the odd quip. Once we became friends with them, though, we had such a laugh. They'd say, 'OK. Keren you play the keyboards on this bit, Siobhan and Sara you play maracas. We just joined in on their tracks – we must have done four or five in the end. But that was a good

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KEREN WOODWARD

learning experience for us where we gained confidence in the studio. They included us in everything that they were doing."

"They taught us that you don't have to be trained or to have a huge background in music, it really was that DIY sensibility of people like The Slits," points out Sara. "It's the strangest thing to be a teenager where you've only ever watched *Top Of The Pops* on telly, then the next minute we're all on it. I didn't know what the red or green lights meant – which cameras to look at and all that kinda stuff. The early ones are just unbearable to watch!"

"Terry also had the idea for us to wear those awful tracksuit ra-ra skirts that I absolutely hated with a passion. We came from that edgy scene of Portobello Road-style outfits with the backcombed hair. It just wasn't my thing AT ALL!"

HI-NRG SUPPLIERS

You get the sense that Bananarama's pure pop aesthetic is most wholly embraced by Keren – especially the Stock Aitken and Waterman years. Sara's love of Patti Smith and Debbie Harry combined with Siobhan's more envelope-pushing wishes for the band propelled them into more lyrically mature territory for their eponymous second album.

Sara agrees that the years of fighting for their right to be taken seriously were difficult: "If you're slightly intelligent and you want to put something more into your music rather than just 'I love you, you love me', then it was quite hard. "I think the perception of us was – I don't know if it was manufactured – but I just think they thought we were three pretty, gruff little teenager girls. Why do they want to sing about war and starvation?" Keren: "I'm not sure it really suited us anyway..."

"I don't think we realised at first how the music industry would pigeonhole us," Sara continues. "We had no knowledge of the press and how a male-dominated industry would treat us. I just grew up thinking that I could do anything I want; I was writing my own songs, it was all great.

"In terms of the people that we befriended over the years, first we knew Paul Cook, then we knew The Cure, then The Prodigy and Oasis. It wasn't like we needed to know them, we just gravitated towards each other



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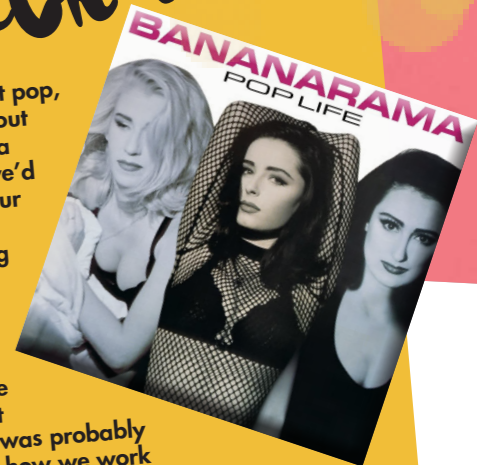
Going for the Youth vote

Can Classic Pop make the case for the reappraisal of an underappreciated Bananarama back catalogue outlier? *Pop Life* may have stalled at No.42 in the May 1991 album charts but it now feels like the group's most diverse LP. There's a sprinkling of SAW pure pop but the addition of Youth as a producer – the Killing Joke bassist who's worked with everyone from The Verve and Paul McCartney to Marilyn Manson and The Charlatans – beefed up their sound to take in everything from acid house to flamenco and retro rock.

Standout single *Only Your Love* took a leaf out of Primal Scream's *Loaded* book by reinventing *Sympathy For The Devil*. It even sampled The Stone Roses' *Fools Gold*. How about that for reasserting your indie credentials? Keren explains: "That was the first time that drum & bass came in along with the whole element of programmed beats and samples. Having come out of the Stock Aitken and Waterman phase, we wanted to stretch ourselves and do something different. It was the 90s,

too, it wasn't pop, it wasn't about Bananarama anymore, we'd sorta had our day so we had nothing to lose. It was a really good experience doing that record. It was probably more like how we work now in some ways. We weren't going to a big studio, we went to Youth's studio in Wandsworth."

"We'd known Youth since we were teenagers in pubs," chimes in Sara. "It was quite strange that 10 years later we'd end up doing an album with him. We first knew him at the time he lived in a squat in Ladbroke Grove – we were always round there. Alex Paterson from The Orb lived with him in that squat!"



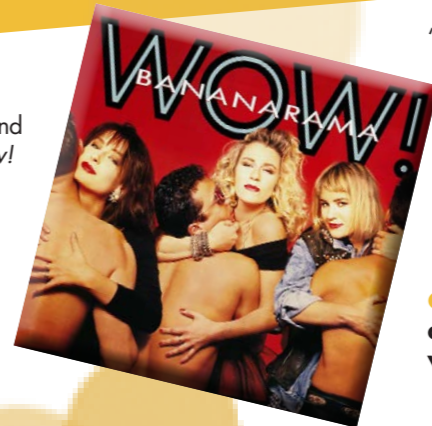
with the same attitude. Sometimes people in the industry just saw three girls in ra-ra skirts and thought, 'There's no credibility there.'"

"It took a while for us to realise how people perceived us," adds Keren. "You then attempt to get across the fact you're not like that, then you think, 'Oh God, who cares?'"

Bananarama's evolution into titans of pure pop seems wholly natural. They've paid their dues as icons of quirky DIY punk pop, now they've happily embraced something a little more refined.

"We started with a real indie phase, some really unusual records and collaborations – and we loved that sound. But we heard Hi-NRG at gay clubs and absolutely loved it. I adored the *Wow!* album. There's some brilliant pop songs on it," adds Dallin to counter her original punk influences.

Her colleague agrees: "*Wow!* contains some classic pop songs and unashamedly so. For me, it was the point where I thought,



'This is what I should be doing'. It's just absolute out-and-out pop music. I really enjoyed performing those songs and had a whale of a time even promoting them.

"When we did things like *I Heard A Rumour* and *Love In The First Degree*, they're just amazingly uplifting pop songs. I had no qualms about doing those kind of pop songs and still don't." ■

● *In Stereo* is released by In Synk on 19 April and reviewed on page 81. For UK tour dates, visit bananarama.co.uk

