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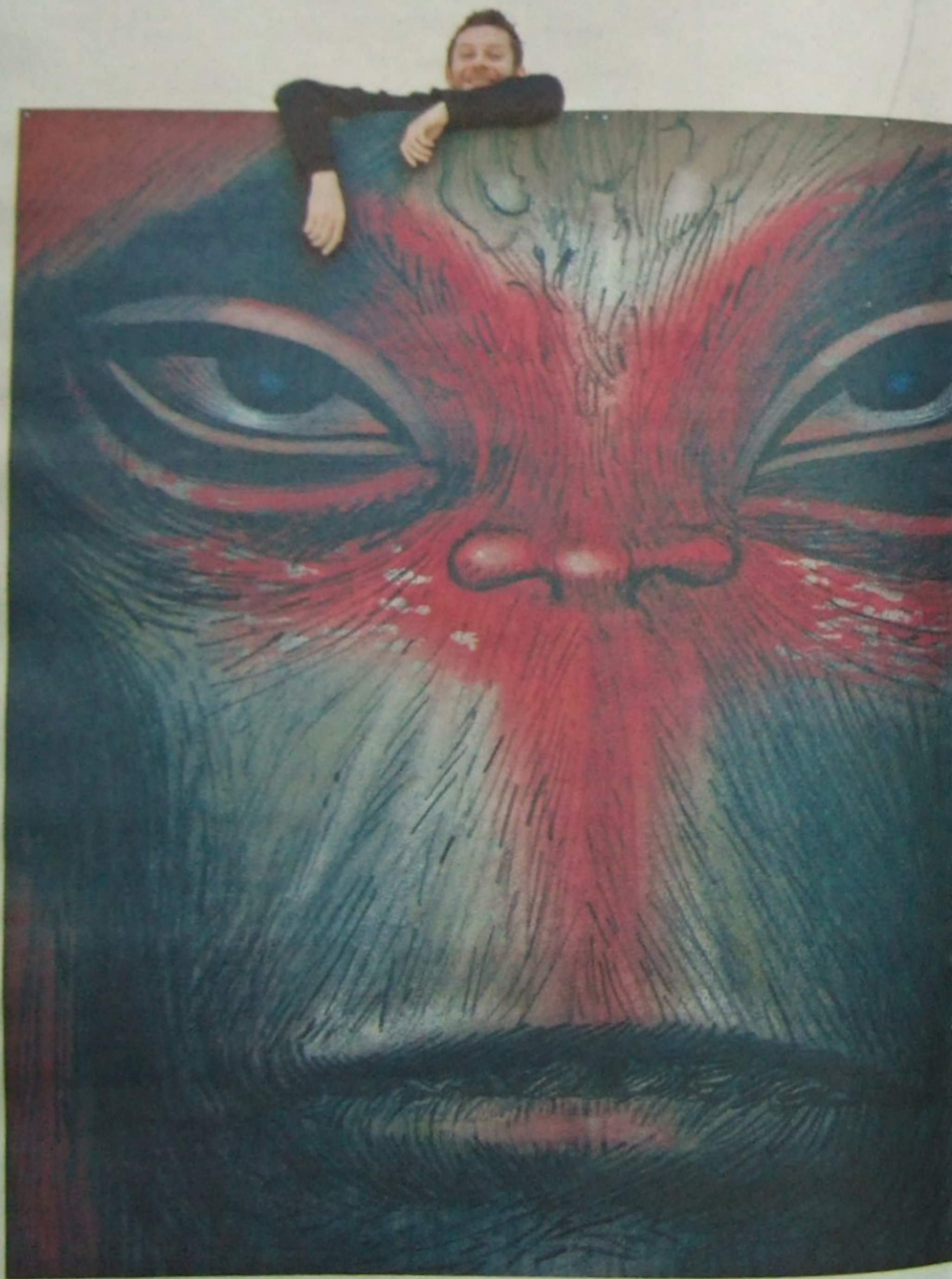
ARTFUL MONKEYS

From Britpop to Beijing - the long, strange journey of Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett. By Paul Morley

PLUS

KATY PERRY
PUBLIC ENEMY
WILL YOUNG
JULIAN COPE

PORTRAIT
HARRY BORDEN



JAMIE HEWLETT AND
DAMON ALBARN, SHOT
EXCLUSIVELY FOR OMM AT
JASMIN STUDIOS, WEST
LONDON, 21 JULY 2008

MONKEY MAGIC

*From an opera to an animation and
a record and maybe even a band,
Monkey has evolved. **Paul Morley** enters the
ever-changing, always inventive world of
Jamie Hewlett and Damon Albarn.*

*Portraits by **Harry Borden**.
All artwork by **Jamie Hewlett***



On the idea that things must have a beginning being due to the poverty of our thoughts

Eleven endings to a piece of writing about the musician, realist and fantasist Damon Albarn and his creative sidekick and fellow conspirator, the graphic artist Jamie Hewlett.

1. It's a glorious summer day in late July. Damon and Jamie finish their fags and beers on a roof terrace five floors above street level at the plush, gleaming Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. In 90 minutes or so the curtain will rise for the final performance of a four-day run of their Buddhist acrobatic meta-musical *Monkey: Journey to the West*. London stretches all around their perch at the heart of the establishment – the London Eye, Nelson's Column, the Houses of Parliament, Battersea Power Station. They are perhaps on top of the world, although the tousled, bleary-eyed, black-clad pair look as though they've just popped to their local for a gossip and a giggle. In one universe we can imagine that, as hot-shot entertainment producers with an uncanny, unlikely understanding of how to give the public what they want, with a daring twist, they are smoking cigars and drinking champagne. On the other hand, here are two close pals with the same contagious sense of humour and furtive relish for rearranging reality, both just turned 40, who can't believe they've just got away with what they've just got away with. They're already planning what, with luck, hard work and a good idea, they might get away with next. What language, century and country this project might be based in, what elusive, even invisible, name it will go by, how specialist and arcane the collaborators will be, is anyone's guess. Jamie takes a puff on his imaginary cigar. 'Anything is possible,' he grins. Damon cackles into his imaginary champagne. An airship gracefully floats past across the sky. For a second it appears that it has *Monkey: Journey to the West* emblazoned on it.

2. Anything is possible.

3. 'I kept having to look at the tickets,' says Damon, who's a bit more of a daredevil than his playmate. 'Just to check that we really were at the Royal Opera House. I mean, what an honour.'

4. 'When it was first suggested we play the Royal Opera House,' marvels Jamie, the more mischievous of the two, 'I thought, brilliant, let's go for it. I didn't think through what it really meant to the purists, the idea of two scruffy oiks waltzing in through the door.'

5. Damon: 'One of my mates turned up on opening night in flip-flops and shorts!'

6. Jamie: 'I went to a cocktail party the other day with all the really posh opera types, and I turned up in my baseball hat with a hangover. I was talking to a famous ex-ballerina who is now one of the directors and she said to me, "I think that people are rather freaked out by your hat." I didn't know what she meant, and at that point I made a gesture and knocked a tray of avocado

canapés all over her dress, thus confirming the general expectation of our loutish behaviour.'

7. 'To be honest with you,' admits Damon, who's been working on *Monkey* for three years, 'when it comes to September, that's it. I'm doing something entirely different.'

8. On the roof terrace of their west London headquarters a few months before *Monkey* plays at the Opera House, Damon waves at a train heading out of London, hoping as always that a driver or passenger might wave back.

9. Things are not what they appear nor are they otherwise.

10. Damon and Jamie explain what may be happening next to *Monkey: Journey To The West*, their obliquely enchanting version of the 16th-century Chinese allegorical adventure story based on the obscenely curious, naughty *Monkey* best known in more recent times as a chaotically dubbed hay-wire TV series imported from Japan. When it was premiered at the Manchester International Festival in 2007, *Monkey* seemed a charming, gloriously impractical and surely temporary hybrid of surreal slapstick, mutant pop, Mandarin words, mental grace, flying monks, plate spinning, fractured opera, Hewlett's vivid visuals and Albarn's own particular quest for musical beauty. Later this year they envisage setting up a large matt black tent by the O₂ Arena in Greenwich. The Chinese character for *Monkey* will glow in neon. There will be no ugly sponsorship.

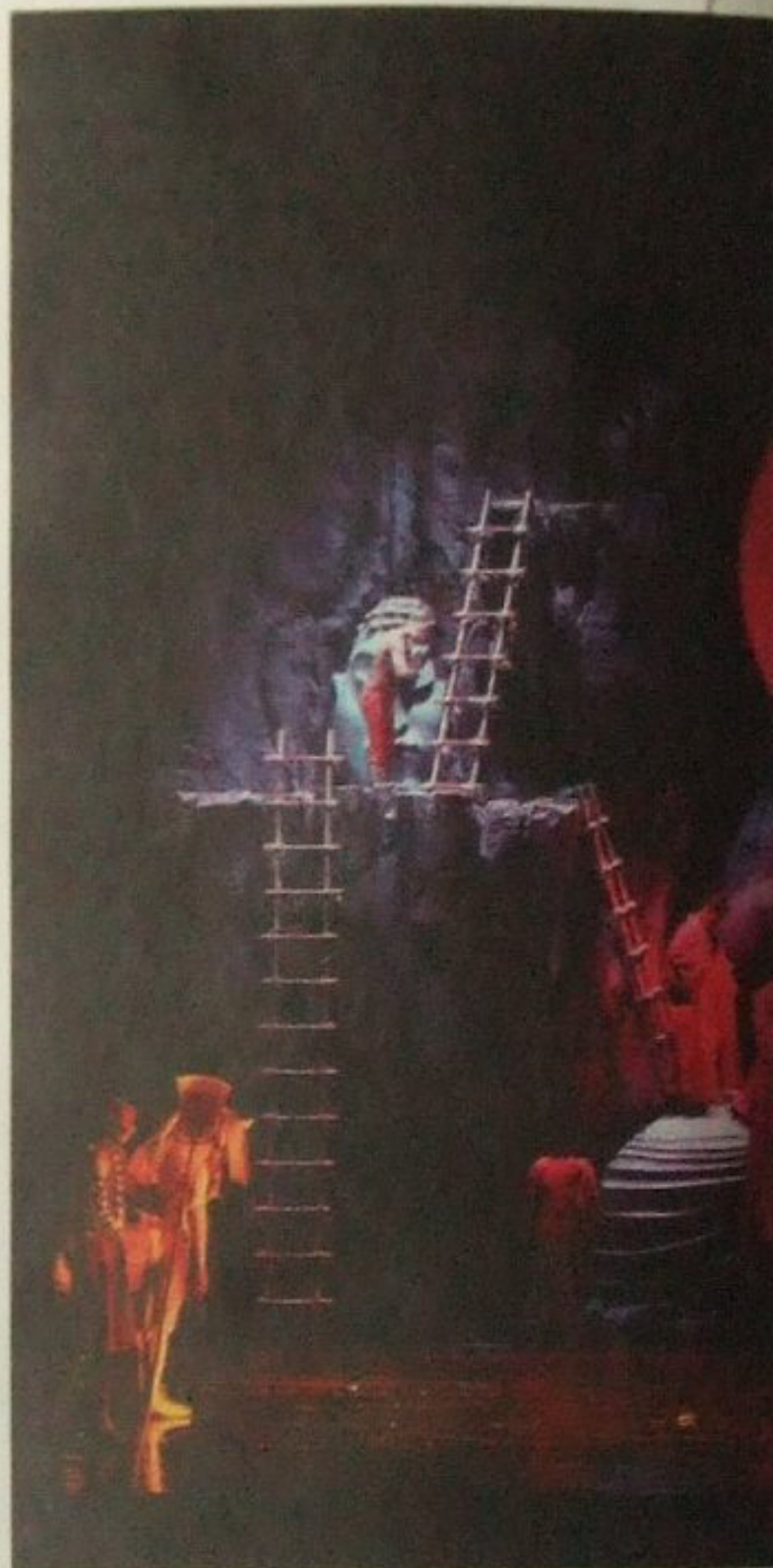
'You will be in *Monkey* world with no distractions,' promises Damon. Chinese masseuses will massage your feet in warm water before you eat Chinese food and then watch the show. 'Beautiful Chinese girls in golden Adidas tracksuits crunching your toes and mending all your stress...' dreams Jamie. 'When you emerge you won't believe where you are. Back to earth with a bump.' Damon: 'We're trying to create a mass-market version of something that started out pretty left-field.' They talk as though this will all really

happen – a serious musical alternative to panto that faithfully examines, via clowning, body contortion and somersaulting, spiritual insight and how the greatest medicine is the emptiness of everything. 'It's such a great fucking story,' says Jamie. 'So much better than *The Lion King*. We've shown when you do this kind of thing it doesn't have to be *Chicago* with Denise Van Outen.'

11. Jamie admits that even after more than 20 performances around the world he still feels moved at the climax of *Monkey*. 'It's pretty special. It's paradise! Fifteen lotus maidens in pyramid formation, some doing the splits and all spinning plates in front of the all-knowing Buddha... it's bliss.' Damon butts in: 'I just get anxious that the whole thing is going to collapse.'

On the fact that we do not normally look at things but overlook them

It's an isolated hot day in early spring, the kind of sunny day people describe as a first day of sum-



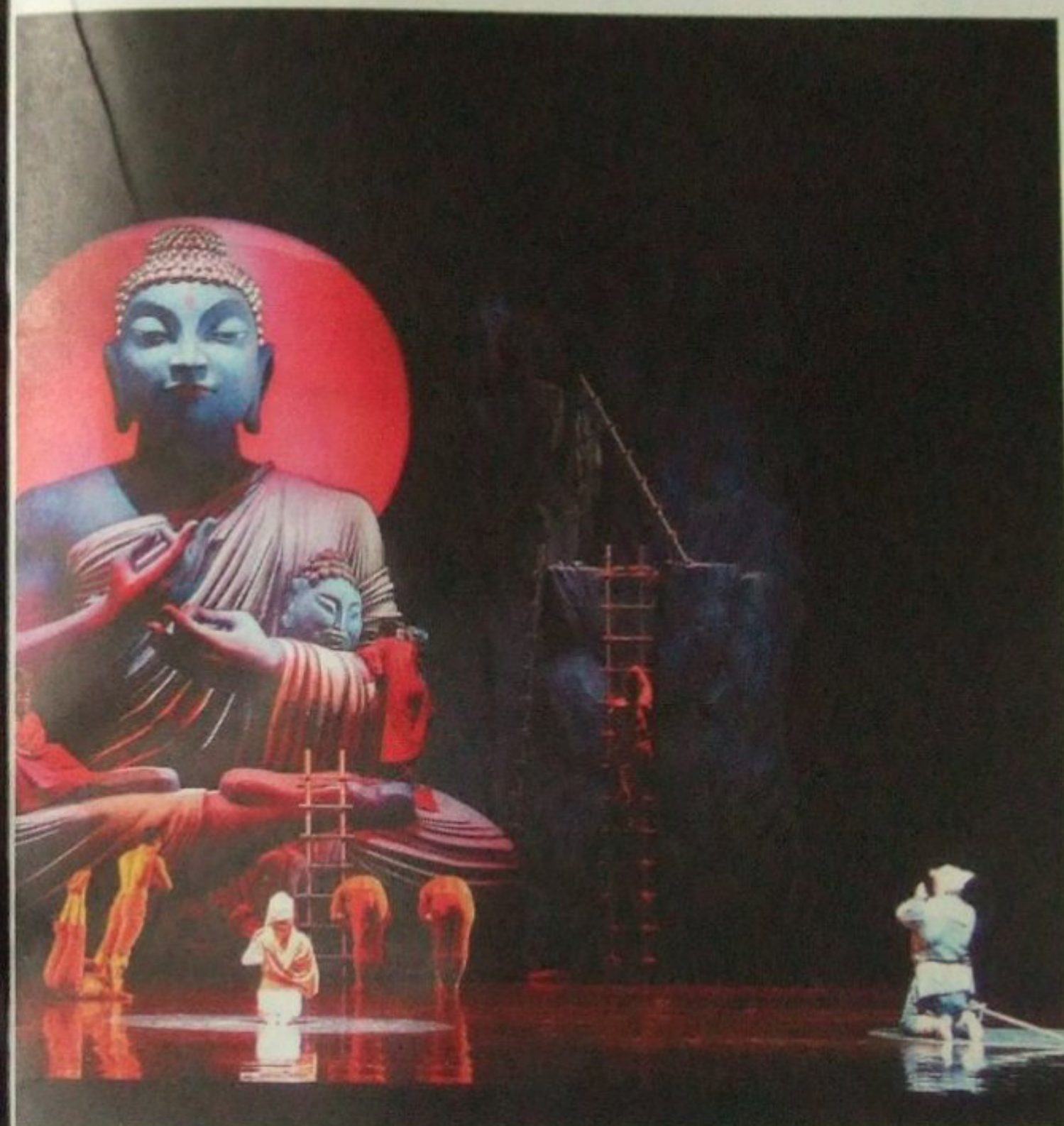
'Monkey: Journey to the West' at the Royal Opera House

mer, even though it will only lead to monotonous weeks of grey English days. Damon and Jamie have recently moved into a new studio headquarters in west London, where Damon can write and record music that will inspire Jamie to imagine and animate characters that will in turn inspire Damon's music to leap limitations. It's their dream factory, tucked away on a modest street near the BBC, Wormwood Scrubs prison and the concrete Westway of the Clash and JG Ballard. Damon, who can be rangy and compact at the same time, greets me in his studio where he is working on the record version of the *Monkey* stage show. We move to the terrace at the side of some railway lines where he can light up and happily stare at the deliriously blue sky. A plane soars across on its way to Heathrow. 'This sky is like a pilot's view of the sky... god, being a pilot is such a glamorous job. Here we are just chatting away and above us there are actually people flying planes. Extraordinary.'

A train speeds past us. Damon waves and urges me to do the same. We wave at the train, and no one waves back.

On being the change you wish to see in the world
I make the mistake of opening the interview a

'IT'S A GREAT STORY. IT'S SO MUCH BETTER THAN THE LION KING'



last month. Wireimage.com

little vaguely by asking Damon what the agenda is today. I can immediately sense the often garrulous and gleeful Damon withdrawing at the way I've formally signalled 'an interview'. His self-confidence drains away. Damon will talk about anything, and seems to be theorising about something or other or raising some point whenever he enters or leaves a room or comfortably has your attention – his wife's delicious Victoria sponge; his daughter's reaction to the museums of Florence; the poor state of the nation's bread compared to France; the tendency for the English to make life a bit murky; the allure of travelling; the narcotic nature of *X Factor*-type shows; the genius of Scott Walker; Jack London's 1905 London underworld book *The People of the Abyss*; the first barbecue of the year; Gustave Doré's engravings of the strange and savage 19th century east London; jazz being of no interest to him after Sun Ra; Chinese politics and the speed at which China is flying into the future; meeting Tony Blair at the Houses of Parliament before he was Prime Minister and realising that it was all wrong and he would never do that again; the outrageous synth-opera of 1970s cabaret surrealist Klaus Nomi; table tennis; his obsession with

history as a clue to our future/or the idea that the past is the future; the legal drug industry; the genres of music no one has ever heard held on ageing tape and vinyl in the EMI Hayes vault; the loss of EMI's traditional values; the loss of Ken Livingstone's London dreams; Boris Johnson and London's TV-fuelled desire 'for a new kind of press conference'; the painful decline of the British Empire; the unpredictable emotional consequences of the internet; how we can learn from Africa more than they can learn from us how to deal with the extreme conditions ahead... he craves knowledge, information, speculation.

He's not so keen on talking when it comes to a fixed, probing examination of what it is he's up to and why he does it and what it means and why he's so restless. He likes conversation, but not really centred on himself, or at least not his private self. He likes swapping random ideas and miscellaneous thoughts about this, that and the other. He doesn't like the shifting randomness and fizzy miscellany of his mind being spoiled by the dried-up specifics of a magazine interview. Luckily for him, at times when we might be getting bogged down in some area of his biography, or searching a little too doggedly for commercial

motive or artistic definition, a train will shoot past and we break from the talk for a wave. Perhaps we are taking a break to consider the idea that life is always moving, flowing and changing, and the less said about that the better.

I mention the word 'agenda' because there is so much that Damon has been up to since he left the relatively conventional pop group confines of Blur and transformed into a more flexible musician, thinker and activist that we might today be talking about any number of things. The synergistic Africa Express; his Honest Jon's record label and the Honest Jon's Revue representing his wide-ranging and wonderfully eccentric musical enthusiasms; the ambient dub punk group with no name known by the title of their album, *The Good, The Bad and the Queen*; the glamorously moody virtual pop group Gorillaz who may or may not have now magically evolved into the virtual group Monkey, who have made an album that may or may not be directly connected to the psychology and sonic flamboyance of the *Journey to the West* opera; the trailers and title sequence Albarn and Hewlett have produced for the BBC coverage of the Beijing Olympics. The Monkey record which does not feature Damon singing and is a sort of ecstatic, melancholy electro-ghost of the opera.

Damon fears it is me that has the agenda, that I am going to nag him about China's human rights record, which has somehow become their responsibility; that I might take the line that he's a slapdash, exploitative musical dabbler skimming surfaces and producing experimental novelties that will not endure; that I am going to drag up the Nineties celebrity nonsense that he has worked hard to bury; that I am going to question when people will be bored with the visibly invisible cerebral sensualist Damon, and wonder when it's all going to go horribly wrong. Or maybe I'm going to love him and the way he dons masks, sheds skins and discreetly reinvents himself, the way he lives for music, crosses and blurs musical borders with considerable respect, designs hybrids with great care, love him far too much. I might add more dubious sparkle to the rampaging *Monkey* hype, where in a way Albarn is the provocative, impertinent Monkey who has learnt to find his faults, feel deep regret, and correct his mistakes, to reform sincerely, practise kindness, concentrate the mind, sever selfishness, and awaken. (There are in fact three Monkeys in all this – the cuddlier cartoon BBC Monkey, the slightly more sinister rascally Monkey in the opera and the much more menacing Monkey of the record. Damon too can be sweet, brazen and wrathful.)

Adulation ultimately worries Albarn more than the suspicion he feels has followed him all through his music career. Those that adore you can quickly be disappointed. Those that adore you expect more than you might want to give.

On making yourself into zero that you might become invincible

Albarn reluctantly toys with the word agenda, and finds his way to answer. He talks in a cultivated drawl that's casual and intense and sometimes verges on seeing the irony in everything

and/or sounding wounded by the appalling injustices of life. 'Well, it's been a different way of making a record, and after spending over three years on *Monkey* I didn't want it to be just a straight theatrical recording of the stage performance. I now know a lot about the musical ideas I want to explore but not necessarily what form they should be in. It's with the form of a record where you set an agenda. I've been lucky so far that the form I've found for the records I've put out since Blur has worked. It remains to be seen whether an electro record in Mandarin is going too far, but I don't regret it because I've enjoyed the process. And if you worry about what people want, you start to give them what you think that is, and that's a tendency I've tried to resist. Not because I don't love people liking what I do – I need that as much as anyone – it's just... it has to be an adventure. When you make a new piece of music you want to go on an adventure.'

A goods train thunders by. We wave. The driver looks at us. He does not wave. Damon shakes his head. 'I think if you wave long enough eventually someone will wave back and that will be... very nice.'

On understanding both sides

Jamie arrives at the operation HQ. He's in pain. Proving when drunk to some friends that he could still do high kicks even though he was approaching 40, he did one too many and slipped a disc. He's been lying on his side for three weeks listening to Radio 4 with a small easel next to him. He's come to listen to some music so that he can continue drawing characters and scenes for the *Monkey* record artwork.

Damon and Jamie are extremely at ease in one other's company and have started to resemble each other even though they don't actually look alike. They bicker and banter like a comedy double act that's been together for years. 'He takes care of his side and I take care of my side,' says Jamie simply, with a shrug. 'We never tread on what the other does,' says Damon, as if all is revealed about their collaborations. Back in the Blur days Hewlett was more the friend of guitarist Graham Coxon, and Damon says at the time he felt excluded from some private joke they were both in on. Now Albarn and Hewlett are the jokers. They decide together on various far-fetched schemes and themes, and marvel as one or two of them actually come to life. Damon veers off into other projects, so does Jamie, but they never seem to feel insecure about their partner mixing with other schemers and dreamers.

They followed up a debut Gorillaz album that seemed to have completed that particular mission with the deeper, darker time bomb pop of *Demon Daze*, where the challenge they set themselves was not to do something completely different but something the same but better. *Monkey* is Gorillaz in disguise, or Gorillaz without the disguise, or something completely different but the same, or more theories about life and death, joy and sadness, with an inventive, evocative, often deliciously apprehensive and edgily elegant Albarn soundtrack. It is written and produced by Albarn, although it is not as such an Albarn solo album, which would seem horribly

prosaic. It's by Monkey, not as such the character in the opera, but a convenient name for this particular release, another of Damon's make-believe groups that both do and do not exist. For Damon, the name of a pop group is merely the foam on a wave, the shadow of a shadow.

On how when you realise how perfect everything is you will tilt your head back and laugh at the sky

Albarn: 'We had all the Malians come over to rehearse for the Honest Jon's Revue and we had them at the studio. It was a lovely day so we rehearsed on the roof by the railway lines. There were 30 Mali musicians playing very loud music and whenever a train came past we all waved! People must have thought, did I actually see that, or have I had a very long and tiring day. No one waved back, though.'

On how since everything is a reflection of our minds everything can be changed with our minds

Monkey began as an exploration of traditional Chinese culture in a dreamily symbolic setting

'THIS IS THE CHINESE CENTURY – BUT WHAT WILL IT BE LIKE?'

and it has now gained a pressing contemporary edge with their official BBC collaboration and the risk to the safe commercial delivery of an Olympic tournament due to the Chinese persecution of Tibetan monks.

Albarn: 'We didn't go into it without our eyes shut, not thinking that at some point there was going to be a lot of scrutiny of China and their human rights. The Chinese are totalitarian in the sense that they do not as a society tolerate deviation from what they think should be done. Within that they are a very liberal-minded society, and that dichotomy is very difficult to understand. Who knows what will happen in Beijing. It's a very volatile situation. But I do know that we have to understand and engage with China.'

Hewlett: 'And do not take it for granted that the Chinese people agree with the actions of the Chinese government. If it does all blow up in our faces, I would still stand up for the fact that we did this. The level of understanding in the West of this vast country and its people is very low and if you get a chance why not do what you can to shine a light on its ways.'

On the fact that where there is light there is shadow

Albarn: 'Our experience while doing this project had made us appreciate that Chinese culture is brighter and stronger than American culture. They've a lot to answer to when it comes to human rights and they can be very belligerent but that's because there's one-and-a-half billion of them. Look, when we started *Monkey* we had something very strong that we wanted to say about China. It now has a political context. There's nothing we can do about that and usually when it comes to something like Tibet I would be in the camp of those who complain and protest. I now find myself in the strange position that while I agree with the stone-throwers I understand the other position. I understand the glass that is having the stones thrown at it even as I could be throwing the stones. I'm not agreeing at all with what China is doing but I think it is important that a dialogue with China keeps going or they'll disappear behind a wall for ever.'

Hewlett: 'And then you'll never know what's going on there.'

Will this be the Chinese century in the way that the 20th century was the American century?

Albarn: 'There are certain elements of Chinese culture that could be considered Utopian if it did happen. At the same time there is this dark shadow across all the positivity. It's a society that is mutating all the time and they could yet absorb the worst part of our culture and it will all be a complete mess. Yes, it is the Chinese century but what sort of China it will be I can't imagine.'

THE ESSENTIAL MONKEY 500 YEARS OF MAGIC

1590 *Journey To The West* is published anonymously during the Ming Dynasty. The text becomes one of the four great classical novels in Chinese literature. It is later attributed to scholar Wu Cheng'en.

1942 Arthur Waley translates extracts of the text, published as *Adventures of the Monkey God*.

1977-83 A complete translation by A C Yu is published in four volumes.

1979 The cartoon adaptation, *Monkey* (pictured below) is broadcast in the UK. The show is performed by Japanese actors on location in China, and then dubbed into English by the BBC.

1980 The BBC release a *Monkey* single, performed by Japanese band Godiego.

2005 Jean Luc Chopin commissions Chinese director Chen Shi-zheng to adapt *Journey to the West* for the stage. He teams up with Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett.

June 2007 The premiere of the completed opera, *Monkey: Journey To The West*, takes place at the Palace Theatre, Manchester, as part of Manchester International Festival.

May 2008 US premiere of the opera at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina.

July 2008 *Monkey: Journey To The West* plays seven sold-out shows at the Royal Opera House, London.

18 August 2008 The album *Journey to the West* by Monkey is released.



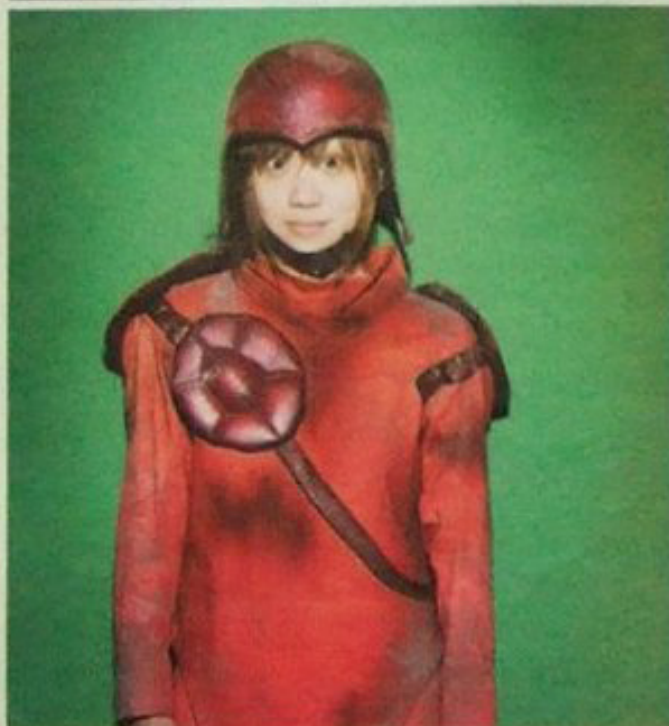
On all philosophies being mental fabrications

Albarn's writing studio is three floors up and is filled with musical scores that he likes to read for inspiration, old folk songs, hymns and choral pieces. There's an old solid metal typewriter he bought in Florence that he uses to write out his lyrics. It was made in Germany. He wonders if perhaps it's from the 1940s, and is therefore a Nazi typewriter. The thought perversely pleases him. There are some windows that give him views of the sky and some trees on the opposite side of the street. 'I'm writing my music looking out of a little window while planes go by.' He plays me some of the *Monkey* music, which blends the idealised sound of peaceful, ancient, remote China with the deafening honks, babble and urgency of modern China, and the trees opposite sway and rustle in time with the music. Damon dances to his music, unashamedly lost in the thoughts he's having about how three years of thoughts – about the history and future of China, about how to follow up Blur, Gorillaz, his Mali music, his film soundtracks, the decaying London of *The Good, the Bad and the Queen*, his own perfectionist craving for newness that honours oldness, for strangeness that emphasises romance – have turned into an electric music that is clearly by the musician responsible for the above, and yet by a new kind of musician. Listening to *Monkey* you can tell it's made by a musician who can cry when he hears a piece of music that moves him.

On how once all struggle is grasped, miracles are possible

Just before the final *Monkey* show at the Royal Opera House, *Opera* magazine host an informal discussion, exploring for a classical readership unfamiliar with Albarn's pop music the possibility that *Journey to the West* might actually not just be hyperbolically called an opera but might actually be an opera. (Albarn has never suggested one way or another that it is or isn't, knowing only perhaps that it is a melodramatic performance of an often baffling story without much speaking and a fair amount of passion, best seen in a theatre. For him, it is nothing but *Monkey*. He let's others – management, theatres, publicists, writers, critics – battle it out for the most helpful commercial, creative and/or critical definition, amused by the struggle.)

A young classical music critic, Erica Jeal, sits with Damon and the production's musical director David Coulter, the adventurous Berlin-born conductor André de Ridder and the theatre and film director Chen Shi-Zheng, who directed the performances and trawled Chinese theatre schools for the large mobile cast. Hewlett cheerfully excuses himself from this duty. The proudly eclectic Albarn is in his element, a leader, but part of a team, the centre of attention, but just part of a group of articulate talkers and thinkers who are all experts in their world.



Top: Hewlett supervises *Monkey*'s make-up during the video shoot. Above: A volcano soldier on the shoot. Right: 'Skeleton Rain', exclusive to OMM.

'I USED TO COME ACROSS AS ARROGANT. I'M NOT LIKE THAT NOW'

The conversations chart the growth of *Monkey* from the early field recordings in old and new, peasant and city China to the orchestral production, and how Albarn resisted creating a dreaded fusion of rock and Chinese music by filtering his response to Chinese sounds and systems through his own rigorous compositional technique. For Shi-Zheng, Albarn has crafted an authentic, personal symbiosis of East and West and he admires how Albarn can express an idea musically in the most concise form, with the greatest simplicity of means, with freshness and life.

Albarn didn't want to try to please both the pop audience and a classical audience and miss both targets. He talks about hearing noises wherever he is, the street, an airport, a farm, and how that can then become a piece of music. 'I sit in the studio and find some noises and then

get stoned and see what happens,' he confesses. Erica worries whether Damon's publicist will be alarmed to hear him say that. Albarn snorts at the thought. His colleagues describe how Albarn's logical but instinctive approach to new music is so refreshing compared to the rigid and institutionalised classical music standard. Shi-Zheng explains how he wanted to do *Monkey* in English. It was Damon who insisted it should be in Mandarin.

Composers are mentioned such as Bartok, for the field recordings and folksong appropriation, Monteverdi, 'because seeing *Othello* was a pivotal moment', the 12th century Perotin, for the power of voices, Satie, for the elysian simplicity, Michael Tippett for the harrowing emotion. 'In a way I am quite old fashioned, and love the romantic bigness, the stirring, quite nationalistic sound of Elgar and Vaughan Williams and those big emotional melodies always creep into what I do. But I also love Stockhausen.'

At the end of the conversation, Erica asks Damon to sign the cover of Blur's *Think Tank*.

On people being like monkeys frantically grasping for the moon in the water

As we talk by the railway lines, Blur crops up, and I make a reference to 'the glory days'. 'These days if I'm on stage I like to be at the back playing the piano. It's strange because in the glory days, you couldn't stop me from being at the front. Now I'm the complete opposite. I suppose I now want to let the music do all the work. I love singing, and I will do more, but I feel it's difficult being a front man.'

Was he any good at it?

'I suppose I must have been good at it and I definitely put my heart and soul into it. I did find it difficult and I did envy everyone else having an instrument. I suppose I overcompensated. It's just that now I really enjoy being in the background. I just didn't want to be confined to the cool rock image thing. I was always kind of belligerent with that and it perhaps came across as arrogant and cocksure. I'm not like that now. It's got something to do with growing up.'

Since Blur, he has been negotiating different ways of being in the background without completely sacrificing star presence.

'It's the key to maintaining a career as you get older. I do love performing, but if I had been at the centre of the *Monkey* performance on stage it would have done my head in. I mean, I've been successful being in the background because of the music. The music was good enough to allow me to be in the background without anyone missing me. It was such a nice sound, Gorillaz, and I've come back to it a lot on this *Monkey* record. There is some concern from various formal places about whether that makes it a Gorillaz record... or not... and I suppose knowing one way or another might help it in the marketplace. On the other hand, it's the same music whatever you call it, by the same people.'

Does he play games with his persona as famous pop star?

'Not really. You cannot be unaware that an awful lot of people recognise you. I was looking at MTV's *Cribs* because I saw that Alex



James was going to be on and as I hadn't been to his house I thought it would be a nice way to see the place. Not that he hasn't invited me, I hasten to say. But it was the 10 most richest Cribbs that was on and it made me feel... better in a sense about myself, that this was how far out of control the conceits of pop stardom can take you. I was watching it as punter, in every sense of the word, and it was alarming to me. I don't think it's healthy to be famous unless you are very down to earth and even though I am moderately down to earth I have no desire to be famous. It did nearly get out of control for me in the Nineties obviously. Blur and Oasis connected the tabloids with pop music in a way that hadn't really happened before. It's not something to be necessarily proud of. I was greatly disorientated. I can draw a line from then to how they've gone after Amy Winehouse and Pete Doherty. It's absolutely not a world that musicians should be anywhere near. In the end, I hung on by a thread.'

A passenger train races by and our yearning waves rescue him from dwelling too much on his gaudy, soapy Britpast, before he found Jamie, and musical groups that lacked conventional shape and fixed personnel, and China, and saw how the greatest wisdom comes from seeing through appearances.

On how your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own unguarded thoughts

Because of their Chinese experience, Albarn and Hewlett were asked by the BBC if they would talk about writing the music and creating the images for their Olympic coverage. Jamie recalls how when Damon heard of the BBC's interest he said, well, if they want to make music of a Chinese nature, they should be talking to us. 'We both agreed that we should have that job and not let any other idiot have it.'

Damon rolls his eyes, fearing private enthusiasm has slipped out and might remind people of previous pomposity.

Hewlett: 'It's true! That's what you said.'

Albarn: 'Yeah, right, if you say so.'

Hewlett: 'If anyone is going to do Chinese music for the BBC, it's you.'

Albarn: 'Well, that's not strictly true...'

Hewlett: 'OK then, how are you going to spin it?'

A train shoots by. Damon waves. Jamie and I join in.

On how the rule of friendship means there should be mutual sympathy between friends, each supplying what the other lacks and trying to benefit the other, always using friendly and sincere words

Damon runs off to fetch coffee and bread-and-butter pudding at a deli. Jamie and I are alone by the railway lines, waving at the trains with a little less commitment than when we're with Damon. 'What I was trying to say before, when Damon pulled a funny face, the BBC were no doubt talking to other people and we just felt we were qualified to do this, because we've spent the last few years immersing ourselves in Chinese culture. And we'd want to do it really well in a way that not only suits the BBC and all the demographic



Top: 'Snow Monkey'. Above: 'Dragon Nymphs', exclusive to OMM.



boxes they must tick but which retains our sensibility. Who else were they going to get to do it?'

Mike Batt?

'Those are the kind of people they usually go to. Phil Collins. Elton John. Never in our wildest dreams did we think they would ask us, that we'd be in with the BBC. I wonder what kind of doors that might open? Then again, everyone will be sick of it by the end of the summer. That bloody song again and that bloody monkey.'

Damon arrives carrying coffee and cake for three. 'That's not easy on a bicycle,' he boasts. A train hurtles past. We wave. Nothing in return. 'Damon's hoping that one day a ghostly face might wave back. He looks a bit like the boy from "Dueling Banjos" when he does it. No wonder no one waves back.'

Albarn: 'It is a bit *Forrest Gump*, I suppose. What if someone did wave back?'

'I'd get very self-conscious and never do it again, probably.'

On how your work is to discover your work and then with all your heart give yourself to it

Eleven beginnings to a piece of writing about the one or the two known as Monkey

1. It's a glorious summer day in late July. On a roof terrace of the Royal Opera House, Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett, who on this occasion are representing themselves singly as man who writes music and man who draws pictures and together as Monkey formerly known, possibly, as Gorillaz, who were flesh and blood cartoon characters. Damon Albarn has checked in on some rehearsals for the final Opera House performance of the *Journey to the West* opera, and he is not happy. The soundman has been sneaking reverb in – an unforgivable sin – and one or two of the musicians and singers are not concentrating enough. He's had to let his feelings be known about their slackness in front of his daughter, and it's made him uncomfortable.

'You can have bad gigs and good gigs and just because this is a massive theatrical performance doesn't make it any different, but I got the feeling today that people were resting on their laurels just because there has been a brilliant commercial and critical reaction, and I do not like that. This is a very proud moment for us and no one should take it for granted. We may never get a chance like this again.'

'I have seen this kind of hype so many times before, and it's the worst thing that can happen in a way. Of course you want everyone to go nuts and go wild, but you have got to be really, really smart when that happens and be aware that it can turn your head and lead to self-destruction.'

Is he watching himself by making sure things are in order?

'I am checking myself, because none of them are going to get in the shit if it goes wrong, even if it is their fault. The reviews are great, therefore at every performance we have to make sure we are excellent and that we deserve those reviews.'

2. 'Chen Shi-Zheng has taught us about the Buddhist principle that you must not mourn for the past, or worry about the future, or anticipate troubles, but live in the present moment wisely and earnestly. That's why we call him Chairman Now.'

3. As the current Albarn-Hewlett group project is called Monkey, it appears that their next abstract venture will be called something in Spanish (Carosella, maybe) and it will

be something to do with a war machine,

or a cavalry training mechanism – the source of modern merry-go-rounds – and it might be on ice, or refer to the carnival carousel in Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* where you grow older or younger depending on which way you ride. Musically, there will possibly ▶▶

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be a reference to Albarn's passion for the kinetic tunes Bertolt Brecht lyrics would be fastened to. And some Human League. 'There's always some Human League. I remember the moment I became a little bit more political when I spliced on tape some of my Dad's Arabic recordings over the Human League's 'The Lebanon'. Heaven 17's *Penthouse and Pavement* was a favourite. And there's the Specials and the *Combat Rock* Clash and Big Audio Dynamite. But when I was a kid I had all this access to African and Asian and Indian music and spirituals, Paul Robeson. That was what I listened to growing up. That was what was played at home. Sufi music. I absorbed it all. I didn't arrive at this non-pop music in a Beatles-like revelation. It was always there. In a way, pop took me away from it for a while.'

4. Anything is possible. You should hear their idea about what they want to do for the live broadcast when the Beijing Olympics hands over to the London Games. I don't want to give away the surprise, but it involves Buckingham Palace, Phil Daniels and a Chinese choir.

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5. Albarn: 'I do not understand bands that just go on and on and on and on and when they make a record they always end up in the same place. Pop groups can be very militant about their sound and retain it for ever. I suppose it's because they do not want to lose touch with their audience. They really love their audience. It's a friendship they don't want to threaten by changing.'

6. Hewlett: 'We had fantastic lunches with Terry Gilliam about turning *Journey to the West* into a film.

That's the closest we ever got to a Monkey film.' Albarn: 'We spend a lot of our life talking about a film.'

7. Hewlett: 'Maybe China will be the first Empire to really conquer space.'

And unlike America they won't take God with them.

Albarn: 'That's the great thing about China. They don't have this insane idea that there's a man in a white beard sitting in the sky. They think about life more cosmically.'

8. Albarn: 'I don't think Blur ever fulfilled their full potential. But it doesn't matter if they never do. Graham Coxon is happy doing what he's doing and I'm happy doing what I'm doing. So that's all

right then.'

9. Has Damon Albarn become a kind of David Bowie, shifting from musical space to musical space, pulling off conjuring trick after conjuring trick, like a shifty postmodern musical wizard? Or, after his flirtation with pop stardom, is he releasing increasingly obscure projects with increasingly confusing promotional attachments hoping that he can shake off the burden of an audience and live happily ever after left alone in his own splendid, peaceful musical universe?

10. At the end of the *Opera* magazine discussion, Damon suddenly exclaims: 'This experience has changed my life! I will never be the same again!' Everyone looks at him. Is this a cue for everyone to burst into song and dance around the room? Damon is a bit shamefaced at this emotional outburst, worried that it's a sign he's believing his own publicity. He quickly reverts to slightly gloomier type and mooches off to scold some musicians.

11. A packed passenger train roars past their west London headquarters. Under a hot afternoon sun, Jamie and Damon vigorously wave at everyone. Travellers stare at this grinning gesticulating pair on a West London roof terrace and have absolutely no idea who they are. **OMM**

Journey to the West, by Monkey, is released on CD/download by XL Recordings on 18 August.