

Fear and loathing in Los Angeles

Eve Barlow joins a decidedly blasé Bloc Party to see what's caused the band's profound new sense of peace

The *Late Late Show With James Corden* is, confusingly, not filmed at a late, late time. In the glitzy green room of Hollywood's CBS Studios, there's a generous spread of mini burgers, fancy juices and celebrity guests. They include a host from *Dancing With The Stars* and Ken Jeong, who played Mr Chow in *The Hangover*. When James Corden comes bounding in from the studio floor to welcome one and all, the only guests missing are Bloc Party, back with a new album, but currently hiding away in their dressing room.

"Thank you for coming," says Corden, when he finally bursts into the band's sanctuary. Corden shakes everyone's hand vigorously – management, roadies, me. He recognises frontman Kele Okereke, and compliments his vivid orange shirt. "My mum made me it," says Okereke. You could forgive Corden for not being up to speed regarding the *other* band members – changes have affected Bloc Party's ranks while he's been enjoying Transatlantic success. The departures of Matt Tong and Gordon Moakes have allowed in new bassist Justin Harris and 22-year-old drummer Louise Bartle. Completed by original guitarist Russell Lissack, they make an unlikely foursome in the world of Hollywood gloss. The faces may have changed, but the awkward band who hit the big time in the Noughties remains the same.

MISERY BUSINESS

The following morning at their hotel, the foursome emerge from their separate rooms, as though gathering from four corners of the Earth. "I didn't particularly like yesterday," says Okereke, sipping a Coke. "Live TV is stressful. That's probably quite a negative way of looking at it but you asked the question." I ask him about this reincarnation of Bloc Party. Okereke laughs. "Technically we're a better band than we were. We had to be. The music breathes more. Louise and Justin are fun people too, which is different."

Louise Bartle – chatty and visibly excited by absolutely everything – wasn't even a teenager when Bloc Party's debut *Silent Alarm* came out. Justin Harris is long-haired and

is, confusingly, not filmed at a late, late time. In the glitzy green room of Hollywood's CBS Studios, there's a generous spread of mini burgers, fancy juices and celebrity guests. They include a host from *Dancing With The Stars* and Ken Jeong, who played Mr Chow in *The Hangover*. When James Corden comes bounding in from the studio floor to welcome one and all, the only guests missing are Bloc Party, back with a new album, but currently hiding away in their dressing room.

"Thank you for coming," says Corden, when he finally bursts into the band's sanctuary. Corden shakes everyone's hand vigorously – management, roadies, me. He recognises frontman Kele Okereke, and compliments his vivid orange shirt. "My mum made me it," says Okereke. You could forgive Corden for not being up to speed regarding the *other* band members – changes have affected Bloc Party's ranks while he's been enjoying Transatlantic success. The departures of Matt Tong and Gordon Moakes have allowed in new bassist Justin Harris and 22-year-old drummer Louise Bartle. Completed by original guitarist Russell Lissack, they make an unlikely foursome in the world of Hollywood gloss. The faces may have changed, but the awkward band who hit the big time in the Noughties remains the same.

"BLOC PARTY WERE FOUR YOUNG MEN WHO DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO COMMUNICATE"

muscular, like a friendly Viking. "Bloc Party were four British young men who didn't know how to communicate," says Okereke of past politics. "Eventually someone exploded." He describes parting ways with drummer Tong in 2013 as "a break in the clouds".

Beneath the smiles, Okereke remains true to form. "I've been battling this misconception that I'm a miserable person for a while," he says. "Laughing is what I do when I'm on my own, chuckling to myself." It's not that Okereke is Morrissey's likeliest heir, he's just very private. Were it his choice, he wouldn't have Facebook or Twitter ("I don't have time to be thinking about other people's sh*t").

When he's more relaxed, he mentions he owns a Pikachu outfit (he got it for Halloween), loves Janet Jackson, and his biggest regret is losing his Scottish accent after years living in Edinburgh. During the interview, though, he is back to being pure Okereke: miffed that Corden introduced them as an "indie rock" band, and



unsure of LA's appeal. "I couldn't live here. I don't drive," he says. "You could Uber around!" suggests Lissack. "I don't have an iPhone." Another conversation killed.

There's a charm to the way Okereke and Lissack have endured. Fifth record *Hymns* is their most personal and sparse to date, influenced by Okereke's love for gospel and soul. Sonically it isn't intended to be current. "I haven't been following British music for years," says Okereke. Instead he's been getting further into electronica and DJing, a world where he feels more accepted. One of *Hymns'* most heartfelt tracks – *My True Name* – contains the line: "If you're looking for devotion, then come to me." Is that a reference to Nineties club banger *Show Me Love* by Robin S? Okereke giggles. "Yeah, love that song. I'm happy with my life now," he says. "Happier."

EXPRESS YOURSELF

At 34 and in a long-term relationship, Okereke has discovered the things that make him feel whole. "I have a spiritual dimension, a very strong connection to nature, daylight, the moon, natural cycles, sex," he says. "It's the music that gets me through hard times or lifts my

spirit. For me, that's electronic music. The only place I see music in action now is in clubs when I DJ, and that's a spiritual experience, when everyone in a room gives themselves over to this higher power..."

At an LA warehouse later that evening, Bloc Party are playing at the launch of video game *Fallout 4*, an event headlined by Calvin Harris, the planet's most expensive party starter. Harris is sound-checking on an elevated podium opposite Bloc Party, who are mid-set on a ground-level stage. "Come on you motherf*ckers, dance," shouts Okereke.

The whole thing is surreal: two sets of entertainers from humble(ish) UK beginnings fighting for the attention of the crowd at a ridiculously lavish launch party for a video game.

But rather than dancing, swathes of girls hold up their iPhones in the opposite direction, trying to get a snap of Harris. "Who is Calvin Harris?" says one. "I think he's kind of a big deal," says another.

The two acts do have previous: Dumfries-born DJ Harris once called Bloc Party "rubbish" in a 2007 interview. "People think they're changing the world with their music, but actually they're just boring the sh*t out of everyone," he said. But this carefree iteration of Bloc Party seem immune to that kind of remark – earlier at the hotel, Okereke said he doesn't care if people like *Hymns*. "For this to be worthwhile you have to be doing something that's gonna p*ss someone off somewhere."

By way of a finish, Okereke says to the distracted gaming crowd, "Are you having a good time? Cos that's what counts." And with that, the band leave the stage, leaving you with the question: who's turned their backs on who? **S**

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

OTHER BANDS WHO RELEASED THEIR DEBUT ALBUM IN 2005

Hard-Fi

Their 'Best Of' was released in 2014, with frontman Richard Archer claiming it'd be "really hard" getting people interested in new material.

The Rakes

It'd be easy to crack a 22 *Grand Job* joke, so we won't. Frontman Alan Donohoe now works as a software developer for a search engine marketing firm in Brighton.

The Bravery

Remember *An Honest Mistake*? Since then, lead singer Sam Endicott co-wrote Shakira's hit *She Wolf* and keyboardist John Conway became a wine merchant.

Maximo Park

Newcastle's finest musical export (right) since Sting are still going strong, releasing their fifth album, *Too Much Information*, in 2014.

ANOTHER 'WHAT'S THE TIME, MR WOLF?' LOSS WAS ON THE CARDS

PHOTOGRAPHS: RACHAEL WRIGHT, REX FEATURES