

Lives of the outsiders never felt as poetic as Scotland's Belle and Sebastian make a return

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BY SIMON COATES

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IT’S seven years since Belle and Sebastian’s last studio album, *Girls In Peacetime Want To Dance*. And, while there have been band side projects and almost immeasurable changes in the world in between, Belle and Sebastian still remain faithful to their original palette, the one that has served them well since their debut set, 1996’s *Tigermilk*.

This is a band whose music has always worked as a support system for those who dreaded school sports days and kept well-thumbed poetry volumes on their nightstand. And they continue to put an arm around the self-proclaimed outsiders whose daydreams are peppered with soft-focus ideals and wishes for a kinder world.

In the liner notes for *A Bit of Previous*, Belle and Sebastian vocalist and songwriter, Stuart Murdoch, explains that the title is a recognition that we could have been here before, and that we should treat people that we don’t know with care and respect. Because, who knows? We might have already met them, in some earlier incarnation. We’ve probably all got a bit of previous.

The Belle and Sebastian care package has always included the will to embrace and overcome awkwardness, and *A Bit of Previous* comes ready-mixed with assuring and mollifying reflections.

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Belle and Sebastian’s world is one where – oh, the thought – letters are handwritten and treasured, conversations take place face to face in parks at twilight, and there isn’t a Zoom meeting invite in sight.

This isn’t an eschewing of modernity, though. It’s a celebration of human communication.

A swirling, folky violin reels around opening track *Young and Stupid*, as Murdoch croons of the advantages of being youthful, unhindered by the nagging realities of grown-up life. *Do It For Your Country* is a sedate, acoustic guitar-led story of hope, encouragement and overcoming self-doubt, and *Prophets On Hold* celebrates the art of the simple phone call to a friend to help them work things out.

Co-vocalist Sarah Martin takes the lead on *Reclaim The Night*, as sparkly keys and a stuttering drum machine underpin a simple plea for women’s safety.

“Reclaim the night, don’t lose another,” she sings. “And cross the street. Hear someone close behind you. Turn day to night, stay under cover.”

There are tootling horns and hand-claps on *If They’re Shooting At You* as Murdoch sings of keeping your chin up.

“If they’re shooting at you,” he points out. “You must be doing something right.”

In terms of pace, *A Bit of Previous* switches between country waltz (*Deathbed Of My Dreams*), lounge jazz (*Come On Home*) and tumbling, synth-led disco (*Talk To Me Talk To Me*).

A World Without You, with its suggestion of leaving all your troubles behind you and running towards the sunset, is how *Beach House* might sound if they were from Lanarkshire, not Maryland.

And *Unnecessary Drama* comes on like a stone cold, indie disco classic – all flailing arms, floppy hair and swinging satchels. *A Hand In Glove* with added soaring harmonica.

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IN 2020 Belle and Sebastian were all set to fly to Los Angeles to record the follow-up to *Girls In Peacetime Want To Dance*. Tracks had been written, and the band was raring to go. We all know what happened next.

However, instead of simply postponing the project, the band decided to stop and take stock, and to embrace their home city of Glasgow. They cobbled together a studio. New songs emerged. This was the first time Belle and Sebastian had recorded an entire album in Glasgow since 1999’s *Fold Your Hands Child, You Walk Like A Peasant*. *A Bit of Previous* is the result.

Warm and hopeful, this is the sound of friends back together.

Belle and Sebastian’s *A Bit of Previous* is released on May 6 on CD and LP on the Matador Records label.

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