

**Stuart David, *In the All-Night Café*:
A memoir of Belle and Sebastian's formative year**

The Glasgow pop group Belle and Sebastian (henceforth B&S) emerged in the mid-1990s. Stuart David was a founder member and the group's first bass player, but left in 2000. He is also a published writer, and in *In the All-Night Café* he finally draws directly on his experience in B&S. The book starts in 1994 as David moves to Glasgow to attend a pop music course in a tenebrous underground studio. Stuart Murdoch, the primary songwriter and singer of B&S, is also on the course.

David narrates events that lead ultimately to the emergence of B&S. Their pace often seems slow, but sometimes an incident clicks into progress and a path to the future is glimpsed. These events include halting performances at low-key open-mic sessions; small concerts where Murdoch's vision of his audience and aesthetic becomes visible; a day in the studio when what will later become an entire B&S ep is recorded, with little knowledge of the session's significance; the commission to make a record for a class of music students at nearby Stow College; a party where the embryonic B&S play to a tenement flat overflowing with guests. When in 1996 they reach Cava Studios and record the first LP *Tigermilk* in three days, the story catches up with the B&S the world knows. The book ends with the launch party for that record.

Here David renders well the sense of a special moment in time, which is also bittersweet: 'I had the strange experience of feeling amazed at what Stuart had achieved by writing his songs, while at the same time witnessing at close hand what I'd failed to achieve by writing mine'. The odd sense is that David saw himself as a potential rival to Murdoch, someone who was just as much in the running to be a major songwriter but who was ultimately trumped by an even greater talent. But nothing in the book suggests that songwriting was David's forte, or that he was ever playing in the same league as Murdoch. Indeed he wants Murdoch to give him lessons in writing melodies, and writes with generous accuracy about the flow and surge of Murdoch's own compositions. I suppose David is not saying that even now he still thinks of himself and Murdoch in the same bracket, but that this was how it felt at the time, and that learning that it wasn't the case was a defining part of his B&S experience.

In the All-Night Café is not a spectacular piece of writing. If David has a Nabokovian gift he keeps it in check here. The prose is unassumingly conversational. It strikes me that this tendency to diary and bathos is one of the signature literary tones of the indiepop movement (in its accompanying prose, never mind in song); though it's not the only one, as Matt Haynes' manifestos for Sarah Records demonstrated a more histrionic option. David's mood is often so muted that it's a cheering surprise when something makes him

really happy: the recording at Cava generates a joyful sense of camaraderie which is unusual in the book, but feels like the right response to making something that would go on to inspire devotion around the globe.

A recurring effect in this memoir is a dramatic irony in which something enters the story which is hardly remarked at the time, but to the later reader shudders with significance. This includes the first appearances of various band members, who start off just as other people who wander into the room. Most evidently it includes the songs. In the opening pages, Murdoch plays songs in the privacy of a bedroom: they include titles that would not be released for years. David drops in their names and rarely disturbs the narrative to explain what would eventually become of them. Most of his readers will know.

Although its mood is muted, the book still feels like a record of a golden age: not because the 1990s feel especially desirable, but because the book narrates the unrepeatably protracted moment when something organically, artistically happens, an experience whose importance is hard to imagine at the time because it might never amount to much anyway. The book is hardly at all nostalgic, but it can make me nostalgic. But the nostalgia seems framed by a wider lesson: that any or every age might be the golden age, that someone somewhere is probably going through that adventure of discovery and creation right now, perhaps without even really knowing. Maybe one day when they can't do what they started out doing, they'll write a memoir about it.