

VERY VERY

What I really hate are cassettes," says Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys, "it's really the shittiest format that's ever been. They all play at the wrong speed and they tangle up and the packaging's horrible. I can't think of anything good to be said for prerecorded cassettes."

Of course, CDs create their own problems. When Tennant and his partner Chris Lowe prepared their latest album for release, they faced down the temptation of excess.

"We had extra songs," Tennant says. "We could have made *Very* 70 min-

And then of course you get weird things like those Beatles albums [the Red and Blue compilations] coming out on two CDs. It's not even dear old EMI's fault, actually, it's the Beatles. That really is just crazy."

Though not, perhaps, as crazy as the obstacles Tennant and Lowe faced in 1981, when they met at a stereo equipment store and began writing together. Five years later, success arrived—dramatically—with "West End Girls," a smash hit in the U.S. and Great Britain. Lead singer Tennant, formerly a journalist, dived

lapsed Catholic and was probably destined to be so, if only for artistic reasons.

He laments the passing of the Latin Mass, which changed the weekly ceremony from a highly dramatic and mysterious affair into something rather mundane and ordinary. And the music!

"The Catholics in Britain and America have the *worst* music," moans Tennant. "If you're a Church of England member or a Protestant, then you have very lovely hymns. But the Catholics have these terrible hymns. And they never sing anyway. Or even worse they have these folk masses with people playing guitars and flutes and that *really*...I find that unbearable. And consequently on that rare occasion when I've been to mass in

by
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With Their Hot New Album Out,

The Chaps From England Take Off

utes if we'd wanted. But that's too long. I think 40 to 50 minutes is a good length for any piece of music. Many symphonies, for instance, aren't longer than 45 or 50 minutes. Obviously, there are exceptions, but a lot of self-indulgence goes on. For instance, *Erotica* by Madonna; I think maybe that's an album that's too long. And has anyone *really* gotten to know *both* the Guns n' Roses CDs? Even when you get something [worthwhile] like Prince's *Sign o' the Times*, which is two CDs, you never quite come to grips with it as well as you do *Purple Rain*."

Not all lengthy CDs are bad, Tennant hastens to add, the Pet Shop Boys' very own *Discography* naturally being the first example that springs to mind.

"Our greatest hits album was one CD with 18 tracks and I think it's great you can get them all on," he says. "But that's different because you kind of know the songs to start with.

into the role of the quotable, knowing pop star while Lowe played the club-hopping dance fiend. When a follow-up single was titled "Opportunities (Let's Make Lots of Money)," it seemed clear: The Pet Shop Boys were a one-hit wonder and they knew it. File the album somewhere near Kajagoogoo or Naked Eyes and ignore them. And why not? They ignored us in their videos. In every one, the lanky fellow stared glumly into the camera while the other chap looked pointedly away, as if he were thinking, this can't possibly last.

But it did. They continued to turn out hits like "Domino Dancing," "Left to My Own Devices," and "It's a Sin," songs of increasing complexity and emotional power. The last of these—a melodramatic example of Catholic guilt—was especially memorable. Tennant is a

recent years, I'm in a bad mood thinking about how terrible the music is."

By drawing on such personal themes and expanding their musical palette beyond the dance floor, the Pet Shop Boys' albums kept getting better and better until suddenly there was *Behavior*—a combination of subtle lyrics and sweeping arrangements that garnered a pile of glowing reviews. They'd done it. Along with John Mellencamp and perhaps one or two others, the Pet Shop Boys had managed the difficult trick of becoming serious, important artists *after* achieving massive commercial success.

"Sometimes nowadays I'll write more sophisticated lyrics," acknowledges Tennant. "I'm never quite sure whether that's necessarily a good thing. I do like the song "Dreaming of the Queen" on *Very*, which is something I might not

the

PET SHOP BOYS

have thought of several years ago. I'm really pleased with the lyric. But then I also feel pleased with "One and One Make Five," which is what we call a Kylie Minogue song—it's a very simple pop song, kind of verging on banal.

"If there's been a change, it's been an evolution toward maybe a greater sophistication. But it's a *musical* and in many ways a *production* sophistication. And we know we're getting better."

Along the way, they've also managed to coax Dusty Springfield out of semi-retirement with "What Have I Done to Deserve This?," produce an album for Liza Minnelli, and give Boy George's career a boost with "The Crying Game."

Even their more selfless acts paid off handsomely. "We were doing an AIDS benefit concert in Manchester," Tennant says, "and we decided to end the show with a cover. Sometimes you get sick of just doing your own songs. We were going to do 'Fool on the Hill,' but it didn't sound good. And then Chris came in the next day and played me 'Go West' by the Village People. I thought it was horrible actually; to be honest, their version of it sounds pretty cheesy. But Chris obviously saw the potential. And then it went down *so* well—it sounded very us; it really sounded very Pet Shop Boys."

Very Pet Shop Boys, indeed. Not only is "Go West" the duo's biggest European hit in years, it serves as the striking finale to their latest CD, a worthy successor to the much lauded *Behavior*. Unfortunately, there won't be a successor to the "Performance" concert tour (now out on video). That highly theatrical show was a bacchanalian extravaganza that took even Tennant by surprise, when he saw the video.

"I was quite shocked," Tennant says drolly. "Well, I wasn't *shocked* really, but I was thinking, 'God, all that was going on behind us, I had no idea.' The dancers tended to get more carried away as the tour went on, until it became completely obscene by the end, I think."

Many reviewers commented on how flamboyant and frankly gay the concert was, but Tennant doesn't see it that way.

"The stage show certainly had a sexual presence, but I wouldn't really classify it as gay. There was quite a lot of heterosexual stuff going on there, even some lesbianism for that matter. I think we kind of covered all the bases," he says, dissolving into laughter.

Still, at some point in their career it became clear the Pet Shop Boys fancied



PHOTO BY CHRIS NASH

East End boys perhaps a bit more than West End girls. Certainly, the best tracks on *Very* deal with this: "Can You Forgive Her?" is about a young man who's gay but can't admit it, "To Speak Is a Sin" paints a vivid portrait of the bar scene, and "Young Offender" details the relationship between an older and younger man. Yet Tennant doesn't see any great leap forward in terms of openness and his objections hardly show a concern for image—just bemusement over all the fuss.

"It's really become the focus of reviews in America, which is very interesting," says Tennant. "But I don't think this album is any more or less gay than any other thing we've done. I really don't want to speak to just one audience and I've never wanted us to be classified as a gay group. I just don't like the narrowness or the ghettoizing that assumes you're from one audience or talking to one audience.

PET SHOP BOYS

(All discs on the EMI label.)

Please

(CDP 46271)

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Disco

(CDP 46450)

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Actually

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Introspective

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"I think there has been a greater realization [of that aspect] by others and therefore people assume this is somehow reflected in the lyrics; that somehow I've changed as a person or something like that. And it's actually not the case. We wrote 'To Speak Is a Sin' in 1983, before we even had a record deal. We've always written about these things.

"But there's always a tendency of people to assume there is an evolution. It's funny, I was reading a review of all the Smiths albums, which have just been re-released in Britain and this guy was saying there's no real evolution with the Smiths. It's all

there at the start and it's all there at the end. And I was quite interested to read that because that's what I think of the Pet Shop Boys." ●

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