



PETER  
BENGRY & NICK  
SIMMS

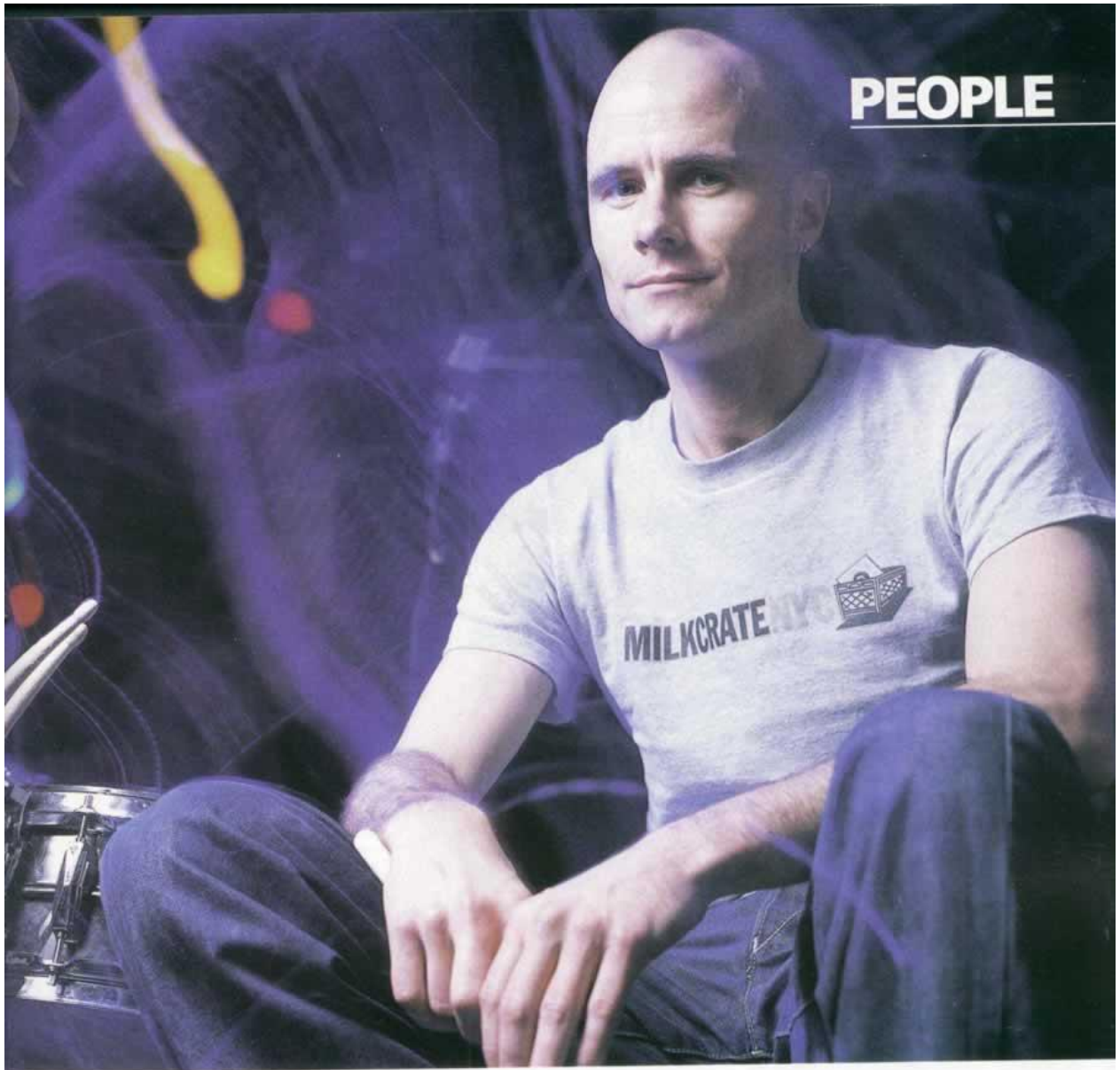
# Retail Therapy

Super-quirky Anglo-Asian popsters Cornershop have spent the past decade quietly subverting the charts with their subtly-politicised but supremely diggable tunes. And two equally individual musicians – drummer **NICK SIMMS** and percussionist **PETER BENGRY** – propel their unmistakable sound...

WORDS: ADAM JONES PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES CUMPSTY

**C**ornershop stormed the charts in 1998 courtesy of Norman Cook's inspired remix of 'Brimful Of Asha', their joyous homage to the Indian actress Asha Bhosle. By that time the band were three albums into their career, having originally been formed in 1992 by Tjinder Singh and Ben Ayres, who met while studying at Preston Polytechnic. The titles of their early EPs – 'In The Days Of The Ford Cortina' and 'Readers' Wives' among them – gave an early warning of the sharp humour and eye for detail that has come to characterise their musical output. But more importantly than that, they made a damn fine noise.

Initially embraced by the critics and subsequently written off many times over, Cornershop seem to thrive on re-inventing themselves and stretching their horizons ever further. The release of *Handcream For A Generation* is their first new album since 1997's continent-spanning *When I Was Born For The 7th Time*. *Handcream* sees the trademark Cornershop melting pot sound of guitars, sitars, dance beats and samples in evidence, all delivered with perfect pop sensibility. The range of styles and moods on display is vast, but all of the tracks share common ground in their ability to make you dance while infusing you with spiky agendas. The taste for adventurous collaborations has not waned – check out



'Spectral Mornings', a 14-minute churning groove topped with soaring Punjabi vocals that also features a certain Mr Noel Gallagher guesting on guitar

Although not founder members, Nick Simms and Peter Bengry have been permanent fixtures in Cornershop for eight and six years respectively, and so have contributed to the band's finest moments so far. Their combination of tightness (Nick) and rolling looseness (Peter) creates an 'infernal, swinging groove-machine' – take them out of the equation, and Cornershop would be reduced to a pale, two-dimensional imitation. *Rhythm* spoke to them just before the final concert of their UK tour, a few days before they were due to fly out to play dates in the USA.

**Rhythm: The new album was a long time in the making – are you pleased with it?**

**Nick Simms:** "Very pleased. *Handcram* took about a year to do, all told, but that was doing three months here and then having time off. Tjinder had some personal things – his father passed away unfortunately, but his girlfriend had a baby, so that was good. I'm pleased with it because I think that it sounds fresh – it sounds like it was recorded in a very short space of time."

**Peter Bengry:** "It took a lot of preparation, but once it really kicked off in the studio, then you could see where it was heading. You find that you know which bits are going to work and which bits aren't going to."

**Do you have a lot of freedom with your parts?**

**Peter:** "Yeah, a lot. You're always trying to keep your mind open with different styles. When we were working on 'Lessons Learned From Rocky I To Rocky III', we listened to a few different tracks, and said, 'Okay, this is what we want the percussion to be like'. So I took that and worked out something similar, while trying to keep it original and funky."

**Nick:** "Tjinder produces it, so he has a fairly good idea about what he wants, but I've been working with him for so long now that I have a fairly intuitive idea about what he wants for the track anyway. Sometimes he'll have a definite idea, and then sometimes he won't, so we'll meet in the middle. It's a good relationship."

**Do you have any input with the writing process?**

**Nick:** "To a point, but not so much on this album. I did on the previous album, but this one wasn't as involved" ▶

## PETER BENGRY & NICK SIMMS

► from the start. There are a few songs that we wrote as a band, in rehearsals, but Tjinder had more definite ideas of what he wanted. The drum parts are mine, certainly, and it is a team effort, but as far as the actual songs go, they're Tjinder's."

**Peter:** "Sometimes you can shape the song. It depends – if it's a song where the percussion is really in the mix, then we'll get that down after the kit. On other tracks we'll do the percussion last, so it all depends on what kind of track and also what kind of percussion is going to be played on the top."

**After so long working together, do you find you slot together sympathetically?**

**Nick:** "I do and I don't. It's funny, because we stopped touring in '98, and then I went off and did other stuff. In that three and a half years, I've worked with four different percussionists. Now I've come back to Pete I've had to readjust to the way he plays, but it has started to slot in. This leg of the tour has been great – back to the good old days."

**Peter:** "Oh man, it's a beatbox, it really is. I find you can just do anything because we've played together for so long, you get to know exactly how that person plays. You can hear the roll just starting to come up, and you understand where it's going to go and where it's going to stop. So the two of us, we just lock in and that's it – full pelt."

**And has it always been this way?**

**Nick:** "Yeah, Pete was very easy to work with, straight away"



### 1 "We're In Yr Corner" From *When I Was Born For The Seventh Time* (1997)

**Peter:** "It's a very constant drive of rhythm with the sitar and the kit, and then the percussion comes in. It's like an acoustic dance song – it's got its peak and then it starts coming back down again."

**Nick:** "I'm quite pleased with the way this track grooves as a piece of drumming."

### 2 "Spectral Mornings" From *Handcream For A Generation* (2002)

**Peter:** "When we were working on this, it just sounded like big, big party music. It was excellent coming out from the studio and then going to listen to the playback."

**Nick:** "How to go mental for 22 minutes or so. We did three run-throughs of it and that was the best one."

### 3 "Sleep On The Left Side" From *When I Was Born For The Seventh Time* (1997)

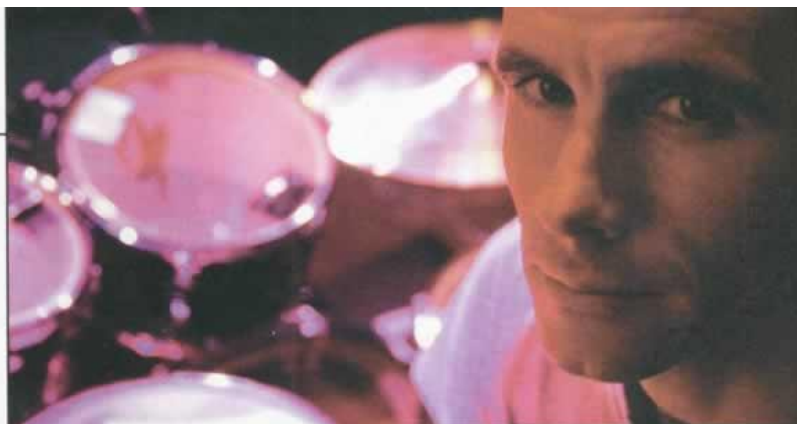
**Peter:** "This came from a demo that Tjinder had made – I remember going round to his place to work on it. Then we took it into the studio, messed around with it, and the whole song just grew – it was wonderful being involved."

### 4 "People Power" From *Handcream For A Generation* (2002)

**Peter:** "I remember listening to this, and I just had this rhythm in my head – I knew exactly what would fit. I find that the best recording that I do is when it's a case of just pressing the red light and off we go, we'll do it in one take."

### 5 "Norwegian Wood" From *When I Was Born For The Seventh Time* (1997)

**Nick:** "It was a lovely sunny day in Preston and we had all the doors open in the studio. We had the idea to cover this classic and it just went down really well. I still get the buzz out of playing it – it's a great song."



**"I don't think we ever know which direction we'll take, but we'll always be making political points in our music, be it instrumentally or lyrically." – Nick**

**Peter:** "Definitely. On some tracks, we'll spend a lot of time playing, get the eye contact and then you can just bounce beats off each other. And it's nice to be able to do that – I know we can both hold the beat and both knock it this way or that, so it's cool."

**When did you both begin playing?**

**Nick:** "I have vague memories of being about eight and setting up pots and pans at home. A lot of kids do that, but I seem to remember my grandmother encouraging me to do it one day! Anyway, when I was 11 years old, my primary school was doing a summer production of *Joseph And The Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. I was supposed to be playing the guitar, but I didn't like the guitar, so I decided to go to the percussion side of things. I was late for the first rehearsal and the only thing that was left was the drum kit. No one else had had the guts to sit behind it, even though they desperately wanted to. So I sat behind the kit, which was just kick, snare and hat, and I could do it naturally, which was rather strange. So that was that, and I played drums for about two or three years in the cellar of my parents' house – really badly – until my mum insisted I take lessons. I was learning from books and playing along to records, but my technique was all over the place, so I then started lessons when I was 14. I was taught by a guy called Lloyd Ryan."

**Lloyd Ryan the semi-legendary South London drum maestro?**

**Nick:** "Yeah, I did some clinics with him a while ago, which was positively terrifying. I'm not in touch with him so much any more, but I still drop him postcards from wherever I am."

**Peter:** "Ever since I was young I've been into rhythm. My mum was born in South Africa, so I went over there as a kid. I went down to Durban, Johannesburg and all around those areas. It was during the apartheid system and it was strange, because you'd see all the white people looking really miserable, and then the black people were all buzzing and happy. We went to several shows, and from an early age African drummers and musicians captivated me – since then, everything that I've done has been related to those experiences. I used to play anything – my knees, anything. As soon as I saw a kit, I walked up and just started to play it. By observing somebody – what they're playing and how they're playing it – you learn how to do it."

**Do you see any complications between kit and percussion, or for you, is it all about the rhythm?**

**Peter:** "It's all the same thing. The only difference really is that when you're playing the kit you're playing with sticks and then when you're on the congas you're playing with your hands. It does take quite a while for your hands to toughen up enough to be able to play the congas, but it comes with time. Obviously, with kit playing you're moving your whole body, whereas with percussion it's mainly just your upper half, but realistically, it's the same thing. I don't think I'd like to set up a drum kit which was drum kit and percussion – if you put too much percussion onto a drum kit it can kill the kit, so I prefer to keep them separate."

**Were there any particular drummers or percussionists that you really admired?**

**Peter:** "Jaki Liebeck from Can – a very, very percussive drummer. He plays a kit, but he can play it like a percussionist. 'Halleluwah' from *Tago Mago* is a classic track. I'm also a fan of Mickey Finn, and I like a lot of the Latin stuff – the Buena Vista Social Club vibe is great."

**Nick:** "The thing that made me want to play drums was Carlton Barrett from The Wailers. Then I got into Brian Downey of Thin Lizzy, but I was always into music rather than drummers. I went through a period of listening to Neil Peart. I think you go through that when you're a young drummer – he's good, but they should never have let him write the lyrics! What I liked about Brian Downey was his playing within the band – he was a song player, he worked off all the elements of the band rather than trying to be a virtuoso player. Lloyd Ryan got me to listen to things like Buddy Rich and big band music – I can still appreciate that. I also liked Stewart Copeland. And Jimmy Chamberlin from the Smashing Pumpkins – he played with real power and precision, but it really fitted in with the music – he wasn't just a drummer going for himself."

**In the five years between the new album and the last one, have you pursued any extra-curricular activities?**

**Peter:** "I did a lot of musically-related travelling. I spent a long time in South America – Peru, Guatemala and Ecuador. I went with a minidisc recorder, to try and record as much music as ►