

# Under the skin

IN THIS EXTRACT FROM THE UPCOMING BOOK *JUST GOT LUCKY*, A WILTSHIRE LAD WHO TURNED POP SCRIBE AND DIVED HEADLONG INTO EIGHTIES LONDON CLUBLIFE REMEMBERS SOME REVEALING CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE CHARMING AND IRREPRESSIBLE BANANARAMA...

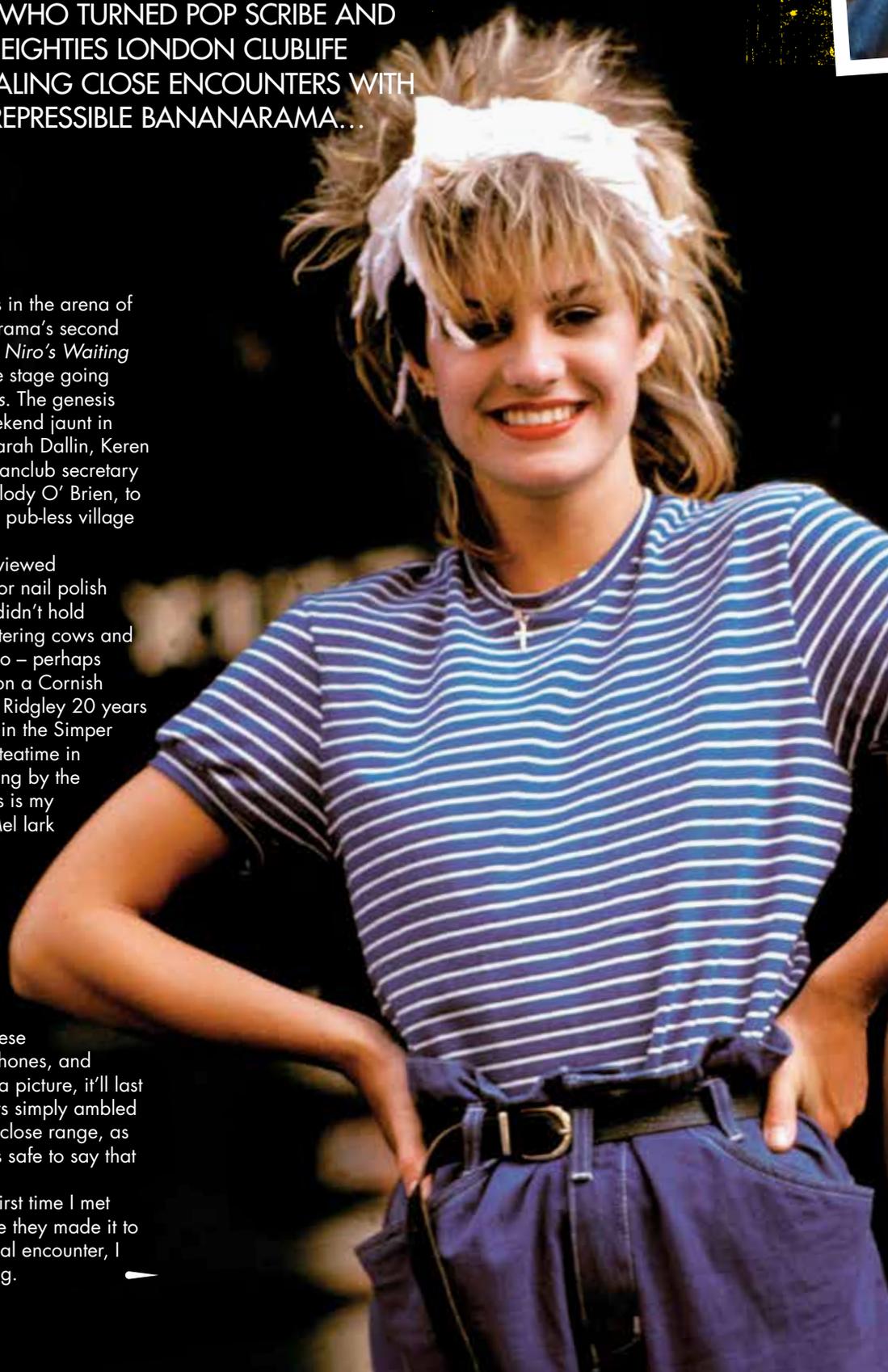
PAUL SIMPER

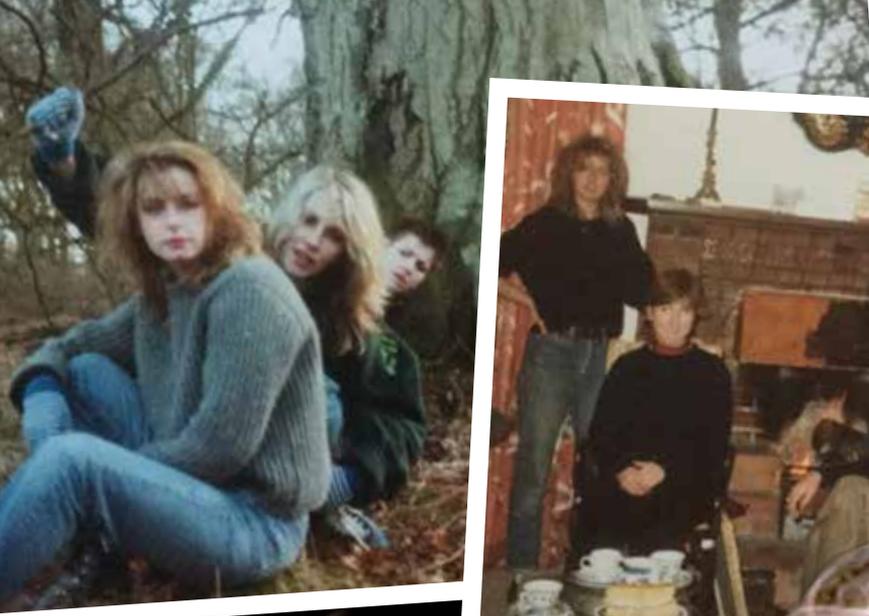
It is one of the lesser-known facts in the arena of Eighties pop music that Bananarama's second album – the one with *Robert De Niro's Waiting* and *Cruel Summer* – was at one stage going to be called *Tea At Mrs Simper's*. The genesis for this unlikely title lay in a weekend jaunt in January 1984 undertaken by Sarah Dallin, Keren Woodward and their best pal, fanclub secretary and honorary fourth 'Nana Miss Melody O' Brien, to my mum and dad's house in the tiny, pub-less village of East Grafton in Wiltshire.

It was a curious weekend. Mrs S viewed Bananarama's lack of skirts, lipstick or nail polish with suspicion, whilst the three girls didn't hold much truck with all the talk of slaughtering cows and shooting pheasants. It was Keren who – perhaps with a premonition of her future life on a Cornish country estate with Wham's Andrew Ridgley 20 years hence – appeared the most at home in the Simper country residence. A photo taken at teatime in the big sitting room shows her standing by the mantelpiece with an air of "Sure, this is my gaff, what of it?" while Sarah and Mel lark about with the family teapot.

A Saturday night trip to the closest pub, The Royal Oak in Wootton Rivers, proved equally uncomfortable, with the locals proving about as welcoming as Brian Glover and Rik Mayall in *An American Werewolf In London* when their game of darts is interrupted. These were the days long before camera-phones, and clearly unaware of the maxim "take a picture, it'll last longer", various welly-clad characters simply ambled over to inspect the girls at extremely close range, as you might a new breed of heifer. It is safe to say that the girls were not impressed.

Still, considering how poorly the first time I met Bananarama had gone, it's a miracle they made it to my mum and dad's at all. In that initial encounter, I could not have been more patronising.

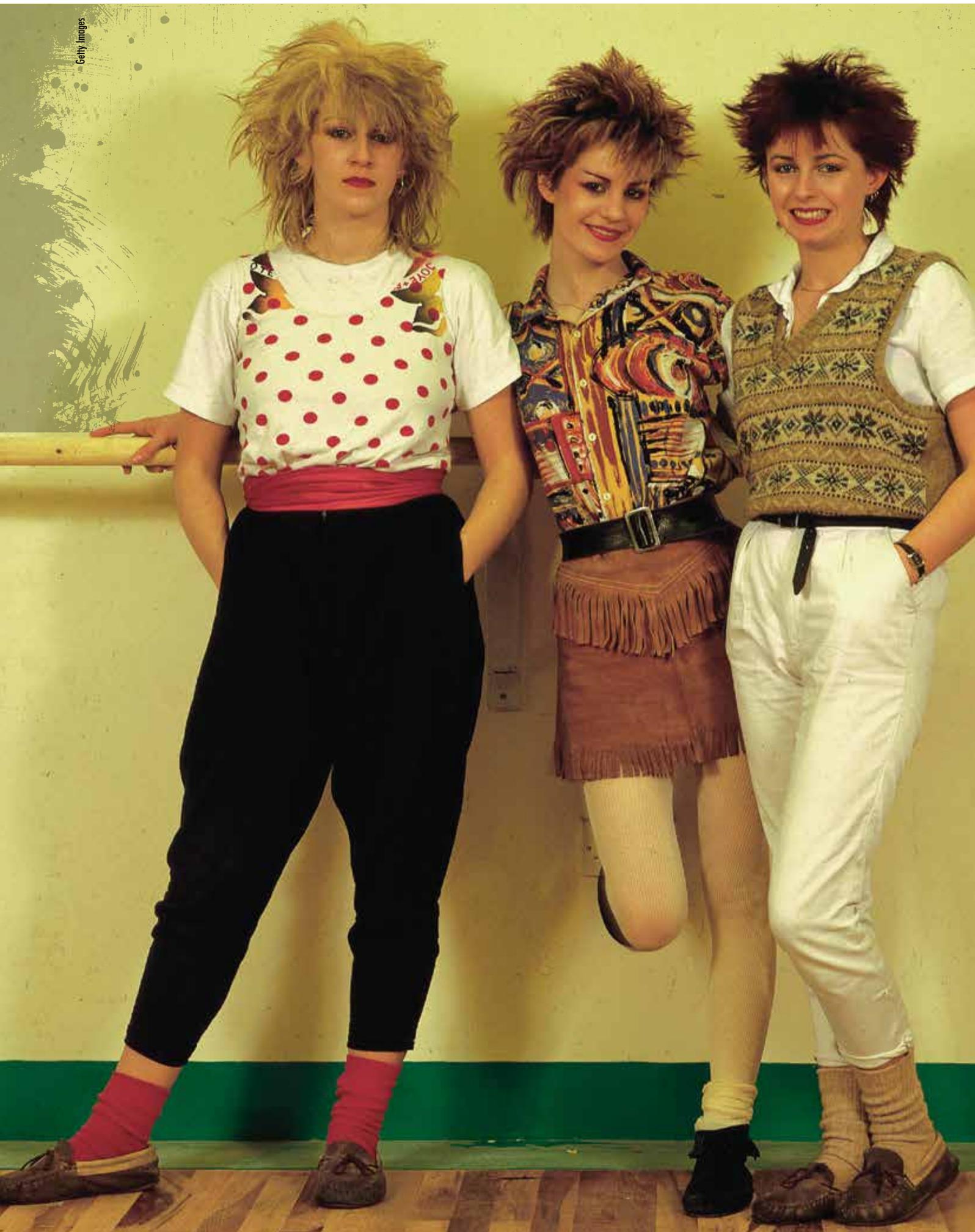




Above: Girls go wild in the country. Keren, Sarah and pal Mel in deepest Wiltshire. Below: Tea at Mrs Simper's



Cathy Images



**POP UP** Rolling Stone has credited the trio for inventing 'the New Wave girl group archetype'. "Somehow," they praised, "they managed to go through their whole career looking hot and bored at the same time"



By early '83 there had been a shift in attitude in the music press as far as Bananarama were concerned. After initially being welcomed as a breath of fresh air with their 'we just hopped on the dance floor and we're making it up as we go along' approach to being a girl group, their lack of polish had now been turned on its head and was being used against them. Their early sequence of hits, *It Ain't What You Do* (with Fun Boy Three), *Really Saying Something* and *Shy Boy* had been broken by the winsome ballad, *Cheers Then* (their first flop) and a so-so cover of Shocking Blue's *Na Na Hey Hey (Kiss Him Goodbye)* which had got them back in the charts, but not into the critics' hearts. In my capacity as a freelance writer for *Melody Maker* I had generally taken them to task for this and, more randomly, for the fact that they all smoked.

Thankfully my relocation to *No. 1* magazine shortly afterwards loosened the pole up my arse, and by the time of our next meeting for the release of *Cruel Summer* we were on a much more even keel.

Sitting in the summer sun outside London Records with our cappuccinos, it was a typically breezy, sarky and exceedingly camp 40 minutes covering fan encounters, disastrous TV appearances and some hairy home living experiences from their recently-acquired three-bedroom council flat which they now shared in Holborn. Some of this made it into the pages of *No. 1*, but plenty didn't. We'll go with what didn't.

The first subject to come up in conversation was a PA they'd done the previous weekend at Sheffield's local Top Rank, which had by all accounts gone down a storm. "You always panic with PAs that when you go out there's going to be no reaction, but they were really surging forward," enthused Keren. "They were all singing 'Na Na Hey Hey' and 'Get your tits out!' Then they didn't even bother with the 'Na Na Hey Heys'. All three members of the group then burst into a rousing chorus of 'Get your tits out' to the tune of *Na Na Hey Hey*."



## "They were all singing 'Na Na Hey Hey' and 'Get your tits out'"

Keren, being the only single one at this time, received the most attention. "Someone said: 'You haven't got a boyfriend, have you?'" she said. "So they were all like: 'Phwoarr!' When we went out the back afterwards they were all pretending it was their birthday so they could get a kiss."

The high point of the evening was a dance contest that the 'Nanas had been elected to judge before heading onto the dance floor for a bit of a boogie themselves.

"I had the DJ trying to do The Bump with me," said Keren, with a roll of the eyes. "I was so embarrassed. He put on *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* but he was awful. He kept missing all the beats. I had to just boogie backwards.

"But everyone was so excited about the night. They kept saying: 'There's never any trouble'"

here.' Then they all got beat up. The manager and the area manager came back and one of them had a closed eye and the other had a bloody nose and a split lip. Apparently the same happened when The Bluebells played there. They said the same thing to them: 'There's never any trouble here.'

The Bluebells and Bananarama had become good pals. Siobhan started dating songwriter/guitarist Robert Hodgens aka Bobby Bluebell soon afterwards, and their chart-topping *Young At Heart* first appears on Bananarama's debut album.

After our interview the girls were due to leave to attend a new Friday night music show, *Switch*, co-hosted by another pal of theirs, Capital Radio DJ Gary Crowley (Gary used to be the office boy at Decca Records when Siobhan was the receptionist). Talk of this got them thinking back to one of their earliest and most disastrous TV appearances on the late night adult version of *Tiswas*, *OTT* (tragically not available on YouTube).

"My God, what was that like?" marvelled Keren. "Did you ever see it? We've got it round at the flat. It is so out of tune. We're jumping up and down. We were paralytic."

"It was only our second ever TV show," said Siobhan. "We just got stuck into the vodka. It was so embarrassing.

That was in the days when we didn't have two halfpennies to rub together. We didn't have any clothes at all to do it in."

"Apart from our spotted catsuits!" howled Keren. "Polka dots. They were horrible."

Financially, Bananarama were still far from rolling in it. The dream was to one day buy a flat each (in a couple of years they would all buy houses next to each other in Kentish Town, like The Beatles) but at this point they'd have simply settled for a washing machine. "We tried to nick one out of the laundry the other day!" said Keren.

They were at least off the dole, and relations with their record company, London Records, sounded better than might have been expected. "We got no advances," explained Keren. "But they just let us get on with it. They've never suggested anything about what we wear. They just try to advise us on the records." Siobhan agreed: "They've actually always been quite good about us. I think they didn't expect much. We signed up without an advance. They thought of us as just a throwaway thing but then something happened, and since then they've been eating their words."

Initially Bananarama had been managed by The Boomtown Rats' manager Fachtna O'Kelly; later, the role would be taken by the immensely patient Hilary Shaw (who would eventually go on to manage the many entities of Girls Aloud), but at this point they were going it alone. Whoever was nominally 'in charge' of them, they were still very much marching to the beat of their own drum, even if that meant the odd altercation along the way.

"Razzamatazz [ITV's one afternoon pop show] won't have us on," said Siobhan. "I bet it was because we didn't crawl around the producers,"



Fraser Gray

"We used to have to run round to the tube station to go to the toilet"

Above: Keren, Paul Simper and George Michael. Right: a typically relaxed and impromptu photo opportunity

reckoned Keren. "Siobhan jumped on my back in the middle of the recording and we had to do it again. She went careering across the stage."

There had been talk, the band revealed, of them doing a pilot for their own TV show very much in the spirit of The Sour Grapes, the bunch of Sixties chicks on Hanna Barbera's *The Banana Splits*, who would freak the four Splits (Fleegle, Bingo, Drooper and Snorky) out with their cool shimmies. "I'm sure if we did a show as ourselves, no one would understand what we were laughing at," said Keren. "We come out with things that absolutely crack us up and no one else knows what we're on about. They all think we're laughing at them."

Funnily enough, this was one aspect of Bananarama that made me love them the most. Their tuts, eye rolls and bone-dry asides set them apart – often to the point of exclusion – from most of their contemporaries. Find a green room or bar backstage at any pop TV show and the chances were that Bananarama would be housed in one corner with a bottle of vodka, taking the piss. Partly it was their defence mechanism against a male-dominated industry, but there was also a healthy dose of dyed-in-the-wool punk ethic that had rubbed off on them from their time hanging out with the Sex Pistols, in particular Steve Jones and Paul Cook, whose rehearsal room on Denmark Street had been Sarah and Keren's (and sometimes Siobhan's) abode.

Tales of their rat-infested squat are legion. "There was a big pit outside our front door," recalled Keren.

**POP UP** Keren and Sarah met at the age of five at school in Bristol, and by 11 they were best friends. Moving to London, Keren nabbed a job in pensions at the BBC, while Sarah studied fashion





Getty Images

"One night that started moving. We had all these old polystyrene relics from *The Great Rock And Roll Swindle* and they kept squeaking. I absolutely shit myself. It was so spooky there. It was pitch black, and nobody else lived round there. We got some tourists round to barge the door open and there was all these bloody skinheads hiding in the yard. One of them had got stuck in the pit.

"The pit was next to the outside toilet that didn't flush. We used to have to run round to the tube station [at Tottenham Court Road] to go to the toilet. At Denmark Street we didn't even have cold water when we first moved in. We had to go down and put a bucket under a dripping tap. We'd go down the Oasis [swimming baths on High Holborn, next to the *Melody Maker* offices] because they had hot baths down there. In between that we had to hang up a towel in our room and wash in a bowl

on the floor. I don't think I'd better go into any more details. It was horrible. It was so wet. I used to get up for work in the morning and my clothes would be sopping wet. No wonder I had a bad back."

The move to Babington Court – a council block adjacent to the one Spandau's manager Steve Dagger shared with his parents – was definitely a step up, but it was still not quite the pop palace you might have expected for chart regulars. The lift to the 11th floor, when it was actually working, permanently smelled of wee. Heating in the flat was provided by a modest bar grill electric fire in the front room, and phone calls were taken on a mounted pay phone in the hallway.

Their neighbours were also less than thrilled at the prospect of having future Guinness Book of Records holders (as the UK's most successful girl group) living amongst them – something that Keren discovered



Cathy Images

Then and now:  
in March 2016  
the Bananarama  
duo of Keren and  
Sarah announced  
a brand new deal  
with BMG records

when she received a visit at four in the morning soon after they moved in. "Siobhan and her boyfriend Jim [Reilly, Stiff Little Fingers drummer] had been having one of their many arguments," recounted Keren, "so Sarah and Mel had turned the music up loud to drown them out. Then I heard this knocking on the door so I asked who it was. 'It's Bill from downstairs!' came the reply. The others hid, so I got up innocently to answer the door. 'Hello?'"

"Don't you hello me!"

"Sorry, what do you mean?"

"Don't give me that. You're joking, aren't you?"

That f\*\*\*ing music blaring! My wife has to get up five o'clock every morning. I knew you were going to be trouble the minute you f\*\*\*ing got in 'ere!"

"Sorry, I really don't know what you mean."

"Don't f\*\*\*ing lie to me!" By this point he was waving his fists at me. 'I'm the f\*\*\*ing chairman of the tenants' association. If you don't shut up then you're out of 'ere. Petitions. The lot.'"

The 'lot' did indeed include petitions – and a shotgun. On one occasion Jim Reilly had a firearm stuck in his face, and there was also an ongoing plan to burn down their front door.

"It's lucky they didn't burn the door down," said Keren drily. "There was no escape on the 11th floor. What were we going to do? Jump out the window? I was next to the washroom so I could have kicked the washroom window in and climbed round. What really worries me, though, is that I'm opposite the gas boiler. There was a huge explosion in the flats next door one morning. It was massive. I was stood by the window and I could feel it. The pressure from the explosion almost sucked me into it. But if that went, it'd just blow me straight out the window."

I became fairly well acquainted with Babington Court over the next couple of years as I started going out with Mel, who was every bit as sarky and funny and just as up for a night out as the other three. I say 'night out', but although the Nanas' prowess at drinking anyone under the table (even bands like Def Leppard) was legendary, they were just as happy sitting in front of the telly watching *Blind Date*, *That's Life* or *Brookside*, picking fault with whoever was on, all punctuated by riotous snorts of laughter.

Their favourite local was The Rugby, a tatty corner pub where they would take board games like Monopoly and Frustration to while away the hours listening to Tom Jones on the jukebox or being furnished with the odd bit of hooky gear for the flat. Indeed, as our *Cruel Summer* interview came to an

"It's lucky they didn't burn the door down. There was no escape"

end, Keren – in true Del Boy style – sweetly turned to me and offered to sort me out a new cut-price, no-questions-asked TV or video. "I'm not sure you should put that in the piece," she said, "but if there's anything you want, let us know!"

So, what happened to the album title *Tea At Mrs Simper's*? Despite much lobbying from the girls, the powers that be decided they wanted something more memorable. They called it *Bananarama*.

Go to <https://unbound.co.uk/books/>  
just-got-lucky to pre-order Paul Simper's  
upcoming memoir ■

POP UP Original Sex Pistols graffiti on the walls of the one-time Bananarama crashpad tucked away behind the guitar shop at 6, Denmark Street led to the building being granted listed status in 2016

