



in search of...
Pooka

interview by Alan Pedder

When half-Welsh, half-Irish artist Natasha Lea Jones met singer and multi-instrumentalist Sharon Lewis in a Nottingham comedy club in 1992, each knew they had found a kindred musical spirit. A spirit by turns as enchanting as it was mischievous, which lent itself more than a little conveniently to their chosen stage name, Pooka. Look it up in the dictionary and you'll read that the pooka of legend is a shape-shifting pixie creature that can turn on a pinhead from something adorable to a small thing possessed. Within a year, they had secured a five-album deal with WEA, and in August of 1993 released their acoustic eponymous debut. Just one problem. The world at large was too busy popping club drugs and tripping out to appreciate the extraordinary vocal arrangements and unique textures of their double-barrelled aural assault. Although the album was critically acclaimed by critics and fellow artists alike, a change in the label's management soon left Sharon and Natasha in the cold. Their second album, **Spinning**, was issued in September 1997, three years after work began on the record. During that time they were briefly signed to Rough Trade for two 7" singles, but that too fell through before they were rescued by former Rough Trade founder Geoff Travis with his new imprint, Trade 2. After an extensive tour in support of the album, the duo parted company with that label too and began working on the 5-track



Monday Mourning EP, which was released in October 1999 through the French label Telescopie. They subsequently worked simultaneously on two very different albums – one orchestral (**Fools Give Birth To Angels**) and one comprising dark and twisted electronica (**Shift**, produced by Brian Duffy). While the former was independently issued, **Shift** got a commercial release in July 2001 by none other than Rough Trade Records, risen phoenix-like from its own ashes. Not a little ironically, the listening public had by then woken up once more to the charms of the acoustic movement, but the duo decided to finally call it a day.

That was four years ago, and in the meantime both have independently released their own solo records – Natasha’s beautifully rousing **The Morning After** was issued in 2003, while Sharon’s spell-binding **The Hour Lilies** arrived in 2004. By the wonders of modern technology, I was able to catch up

with both of them; Natasha at her treasured stone cottage in Darwen, Lancashire, and Sharon on the last date of her Transatlantic Tales tour with US singer-songwriter Rose Polenzani at London’s historic 12 Bar Club.

It seems to me that you’ve had some really unfortunate luck with record companies over the years. Did that have a damaging effect on the band, your morale and friendship?

Natasha: It’s interesting that some people have a perception that we had bad luck. Other people perceived us as the luckiest kids in the country. We were signed during the recession in the 90s, how lucky is that?! We had a really strong attitude to rebel against all the cheesy pop crap that was going on at the time and we succeeded. We paved a path for bands like Coldplay, and even U2 were inspired by some of our music. Okay, so we weren’t Kylie Minogue

Top Ten chart knockers, but we were just as sexy in our own tenacious, daring, “fuck you” way. and we came out with some great equipment and means to do our own art, without having to answer to anyone. The people who talked about us failing were the bureaucratic managers and heads of record companies who didn’t have a clue what a good record sounds like. They just wanted us to go anorexic and show our tits. This is what caused the tension in our friendship. Sharon and I had a really go for it positive attitude, which we still have. We were kids but we didn’t like being controlled by the adults with all the cash. We knew what we wanted to give musically. and that’s what we did.

Sharon: We had good luck and bad luck. I think the bad luck was probably due to the time that we released our record. A lot of acoustic music wasn’t being played on the radio, it was just not what everyone was into. Just working in-

tensely with someone is really hard on a friendship, whether you're really successful or you don't meet the goals you set. But we're still friends, we have a really special connection. I'm always amazed by bands that have really long-term relationships and friendships. I think Pooka went on as far as we could but perhaps we'd have more luck now. Being a bit older, I think maybe our friendship and our working relationship would have been better.

Your electronic album *Shift* seemed to baffle some of your fans and critics alike, but I loved it. What inspired you to make it?

S: Well, the whole concept of Pooka right from the beginning, why we chose the name, was that we wanted to be the sort of band that would be really open and experimental. So that's why with each album we tried something different. The first album was acoustic, the second more rocky, the third album electronic and the fourth, **Fools Give Birth To Angels**, was orchestral. We never wanted to be pigeonholed really. Maybe that held us back in some ways, but it was what we were striving for. I think we fulfilled that goal. We met Brian Duffy when we living in Birmingham. He's just such a talented man so it was really exciting to have the chance to work with him.

N: We always strived to explore all aspects of our creativity. We weren't afraid to be electronic. We weren't acoustic guitar folkie snobs. and we didn't give a shit if people called us "folkie" ether. We loved folk music but we thought computers were shit hot too. Why have one when you can have both?

What's your favourite memory of the Pooka years?

S: I'd say, musically, making the **Monday Mourning EP**. I felt we really worked together in producing that. A lot of the time we had our own ideas, but on that one we really came together. It was really nice and that didn't happen often. It got a bit divided towards the end, like this person did this and this person

did that. Actually, on **Fools Give Birth To Angels**, half the songs were recorded, produced, written and arranged by Natasha in Manchester and the other half by me in Brighton. I used my musicians and she used hers. So it was quite a strange album to make.

N: For me, It has to be at a gig at The Borderline. We did this gig using in ear monitors. It was our first time with them and there was this glorious moment were Sharon and I could hear absolutely everything, all the band playing and each other. and when I looked at Sharon she was smiling at me and we just knew we were together because we could actually hear each other. Unfortunately the ear monitors were so loud I couldn't hear a thing after the gig for a whole week. Another moment has to be recording *Higher* for **Spinning**. The producer Joe Leach, who was also a good friend, decided he was going to cover me and him with a duvet and record the guitar while under it and sitting in a wardrobe lined with even more duvet covers. It took five takes for me to focus on the delicate guitar part and then we went for a full on take. It was getting very hot, and right in the middle of the take Joe began to let out silent yet really stinky farts. So the whole take on the album in the background has me laughing under my breath whilst trying to breathe and play without making any mistakes, all at the same time. It all added to the performance. Every time I smell a fart I hear *Higher*, and every time I hear *Higher*, I smell fart.

Is there any one Pooka song that means the most to you now in hindsight, and why?

S: The ones we wrote together like *This River* and *Rubber Arms*. I also really like *One Day We Will See* on the **Monday Mourning EP**. That's one of Natasha's songs, it's really beautiful.

N: I was really happy with *Higher*, *The Insect*, *Spinning* and *The Rocking Chair*. My favourite Sharon Lewis track is called *This Is Like*, and it's on a CD by Sophie Moleta.

When did you both decide to do your own solo albums? Was it something you always intended?

S: I think I decided pretty early on. I still had loads of songs that hadn't been recorded so I was pretty determined. We both have our own studios so there was no reason why not. It took a while to build my confidence up as a solo artist, and I feel like I'm still doing that now. It's been really inspiring being on the road with Rose, because she's always been a solo artist. Some musicians you work with are just playing their part and not really feeling the music. I think the difference really shows with Rose.

N: For me. it wasn't so much a decision, more an occurrence. It just happened. I feel very lucky that I have a life were that can just happen. It took a lot for Sharon and I to gain the equipment to nurture our musical fetishes, and we relish it all the best we can! Rose is fantastic. It's great to see females show the lads how it should be done.

What did you enjoy most about recording your own solo albums?

S: It's been really liberating actually. Although we actually produced **Fools Give Birth To Angels** ourselves because we took total control over the arranging, recording and production, engineering and mixing. So I guess doing my first solo album was like an extension of that. Being in control again. There were definitely times where you go through creative highs and lows, but Rose was just saying on this trip that I've been teaching her perseverance. When you're involved in the industry, it's all about when you're gonna get played on Radio 1, and if you don't get played on Radio 1 you're a complete failure and y'know, when you're in control of your own music, you have your own goals and your own beliefs and you follow through with those.

N: I can't really remember recording **The Morning After** now, I'm too busy focusing on the next album. I think Sharon's record has a really unique delicateness about it. It's great for me to put on some Sharon Lewis music and to be able to

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just enjoy it without thinking, “Oh I could have sung that harmony a bit closer there” or “That bit’s out of tune, let’s do it again.”

Anything you’re most proud of on those albums?

S: That’s really difficult. I guess I really judge my songs on what effect they have on other people [Rose later tells of how Sharon’s dad cried when they played the tremulously poignant *Lost Soul* from **The Hour Lilies** together earlier in the tour] and the ones that, y’know, get the most feedback. I like the songs where I feel like I can be really honest, but I’m also a bit afraid of them as well. It’s a very personal album. It’s a bit scary to release an album like that, but then when I get feedback from people about what the songs mean to them, it’s really reassuring.

N: Sometimes music is a calling card to reach out to someone and explain something deeper, and reach people in a way that eliminates our inevitable impending threat of loneliness. If someone says “that one” then it goes down in my book as “I possibly reached someone today.” Sharon and I always have a

lot of love to give people. Musically, I’m really pleased that I’ve got my head around arranging songs. And learning to play the piano (e.g. on *Birthday*), I’m happy about that. Proud of it all really. Not done too badly for a working class lass from up North. However, there is always the next challenge.

What’s that then?

N: At the moment, I’m campaigning to save people’s homes from demolition by the Government and money mad planners (see www.savebritainsheritage.com for more info). Other than writing and recording the next album, I’m also working on some dance tracks and writing songs with kids, as well as teaching guitar which I’m really enjoying.

S: I’m going to record some new songs for the second album [she later plays three of these – *Sweetheart*, *Waiting Time* and *Interrupted Angel* - all of which are understatedly majestic]. I’m also working with other musicians in Brighton. I really like collaborating with people. I’ve got a friend in Brighton called Paul Chi and we sing together a lot. We might do something together.

Have you ruled out any chance of a Pooka reunion at some point in the future?

S: [laughs] You missed it! It’s happened already. That was actually Rose’s favourite moment of the tour, getting to meet Natasha for the first time. She wanted us to sing together for her, so we did. She actually got up on stage with us and did a three-part harmony [Rose later describes the experience as a fantasy come true]. It was lovely, but I don’t think it’ll become a permanent arrangement, sorry. ■

The Pooka album **Shift** is available from all good music shops. **The Hour Lilies** and the **Monday Mourning EP** can be ordered directly from www.sharonlewis.net. **The Morning After** is available through www.natashajones.org. The secret album **Fools Give Birth To Angels** can be purchased through either website. Pooka’s first two albums are currently out of print.

left: Sharon and Rose Polenzani on tour in Cornwall, taken by Paul Johnson. See more photos from the tour at www.rosepolenzani.com. top: Sharon doing yoga on Brighton beach. inset: Natasha Lea Jones.